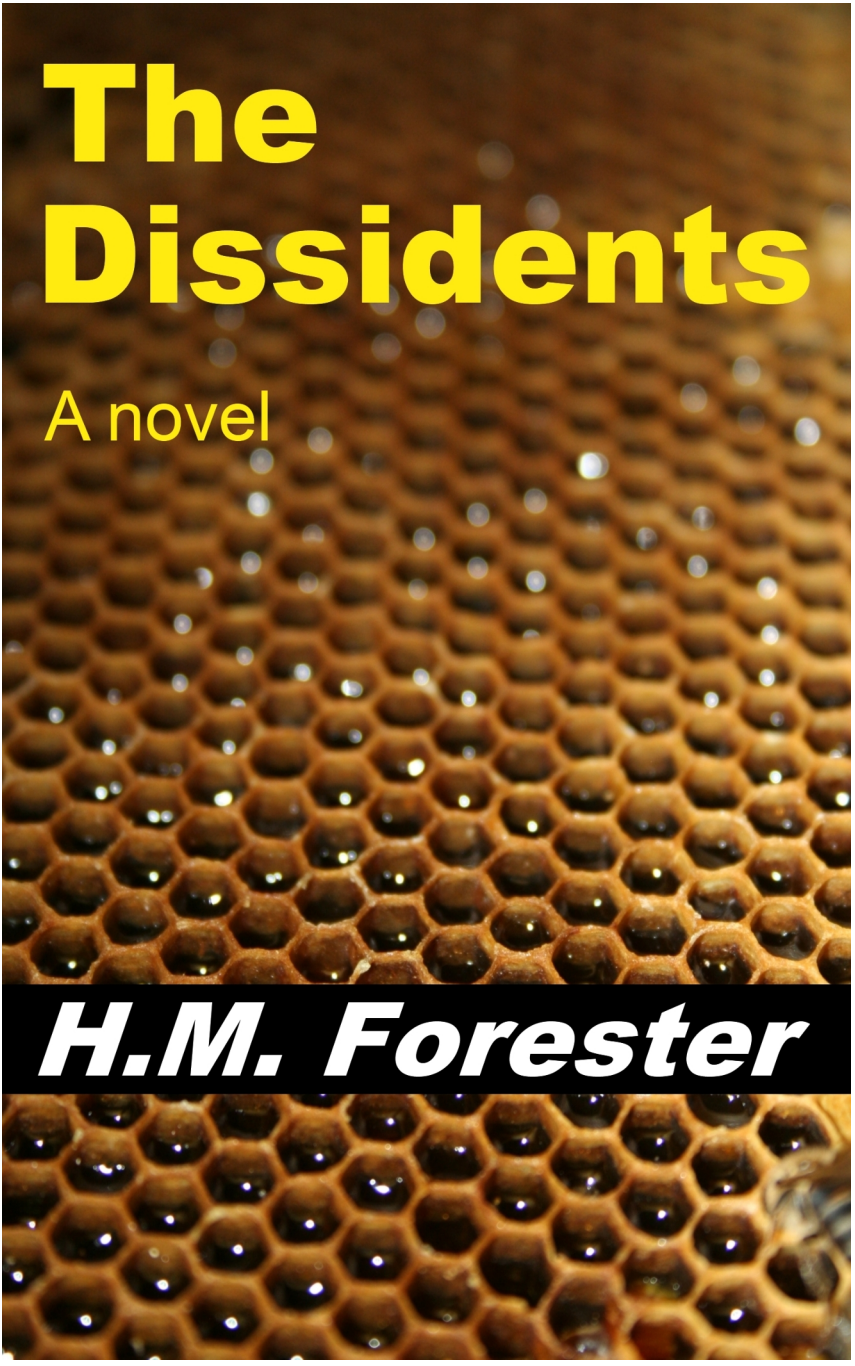
The Dissidents
A novel
H.M. Forester

The Dissidents: A novel

Third extended edition

By H.M. Forester

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First edition for Kindle: 16 April 2012
Second republished edition for Kindle: 1 June 2019
Third extended edition: 17 November 2025
Minor fixes (rev 3.1): 26 November 2025

Sher Point Publications, UK
https://mystical-faction.blogspot.co.uk/

Front cover image: A resized version of a photograph depicting the honeycomb of *Apis mellifera capensis*, the Cape honey bee, taken by the Wikimedia Commons user “Discott” on 1 February 2012. Source: Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Dedication

This book is especially dedicated to my frequent correspondent and dear friend, Miland Joshi, for his marvellous story ideas for the newly introduced second part of this book, a continuation from the cliffhanger that had long eluded me; for spotting typos that had also eluded me; and not least for introducing me to the wonderful world of Esperanto, a transnational language and culture I'm just beginning to learn, as a *komencanto*, slowly and unsurely.

Dedicated also to the peaceful dissidents of misguided, myopic, idiotic, corrupt, cruel, or despotic regimes everywhere, and to the ever-present *Lumo-Serĉantoj*, wherever you may be. You know who you are.

Part 1: Exile

"Homo sapiens"

In Days to come, Days slow to dawn,
when Wisdom deigns to dwell with men,
These echoes of a voice long stilled
haply shall wake responsive strain:

Wend now thy way with brow serene,
fear not thy humble tale to tell:—
The whispers of the Desert-wind;
the tinkling of the camel's bell.

~ Richard F. Burton, *The Kasidah of Haji Abdu El-Yezdi*.

1. The dawn raid

Enforcement Officer Kingsley checked the remaining charge on his disrupter and eased off the safety catch. After wiping the beads of perspiration from his furrowed brow, he lowered the tinted, protective visor of his helmet and snapped it into place. Not knowing what opposition they might face on the other side of the door, this was a tense moment.

Sometimes the dissidents would meekly surrender like gentle lambs, and other times they'd try to fight their way out like cornered rats, with tooth and claw and all guns blazing; depending on whether they gave their allegiance to a pacifist or militant faction.

Kingsley was tough, with a muscular physique patiently and diligently honed over the years through daily workouts in the gym, and he had a rugged jaw line. A few years back, a dissident had landed him an almighty punch on the jaw and Kingsley had just stood there, shrugged off the blow and laughed in his assailant's face. The guy had run off screaming, having just broken three knuckles in his hand. In part, that's how Kingsley had earned his nickname in the Force: "The Rock". The others joked about how his jaw was so strong, it might have been chiselled out of a slab of granite. But that was only part of the story. What had really toughened up Kingsley – not physically but mentally and emotionally – were the years and years that he'd spent dealing with the dissidents and crims and other pond life, on the front line: on the back streets and the stinking, garbage-strewn alleyways and in the pitiful, neglected slums; and that's the way he liked it.

He'd been offered administrative promotion three times now, but each time he'd dismissed the opportunity, knowing that he simply wasn't suited to sitting behind a desk dictating tedious reports into a computer terminal and querying the expert system about legal technicalities and minutiae, or chairing long and boring committee meetings to decide what colour to paint the staff restroom.

In spite of his years of experience, however, Kingsley knew

full well that out on the streets his reputation was of little use beyond that of a mild deterrent; that there was no room for sitting on your laurels – if you valued your life, that was – and that an Enforcer was only as good as he was on the day, in the here and now. Kingsley never once forgot that he was as mortal as any other, and that all it would take to dispatch him from this world was a single, unlucky or well-aimed blade or bullet.

That's how his own father had died, in the line of duty, on the very eve of his honourable retirement, years ago in a botched raid on a militant cell; and that was the primary reason that Kingsley had abandoned college and joined the ranks himself. He'd arrested countless dissidents in his career, yet still he felt no closer to settling that old score and finally finding closure. Perhaps he never would find closure this way, for they weren't fighting a conventional enemy, and the force never secured a defining victory. All they were ever doing was nibbling at the edges of this irrepressible cancerous growth.

Someone was up already in the next house and they had the radio on, blaring out strident hymns like *When the Hive is Called Upon* and *Glory to Our Greater Good*, interspersed with brief and appropriate sermons. It must have been the Religious Channel, which was on some kind of endless loop, with the same hymns coming round again and again as regular as clockwork. On the hour, every hour, they always played that rousing all-time favourite, *Hive of Plenty*. But right now the radio was driving Kingsley to distraction and he was sorely tempted to go next door, set his disrupter on maximum and obliterate the blessèd contraption.

The department had received an anonymous tip-off about an Individualist dissident cell living and operating on Kingsley's patch and he, his partner Jenkins and four other officers were about to carry out a dawn raid. Jenkins had stuck shaped charges on the hinge side of the door, which was more often than not the weak spot, and they'd taken cover close up to the wall, out of the way of the blast.

Drawing in a deep breath, he gave the signal; and as Jenkins pressed the little red button, the charges blew and the door was violently wrenched from the wall by the force of the sharp blast and flung inside, showering the hallway with splintered fragments

of plastic.

A dark, acrid cloud of spent explosive billowed out into the street; but even before the dust had settled, three of them were inside whilst the others waited round the back in case any of the suspects beat a hasty exit through the rear of the premises.

Well, that finally silenced the damn radio next door and would have the neighbours' net curtains twitching.

"Armed Enforcers!" Kingsley bellowed again and again as they ran from room to room; kicking in the doors and waving their pistols menacingly, ready for any sign of resistance.

Finally they entered the bedroom, taking-in the scene in an instant. There was a man standing there, stark naked and ready for fight or flight.

"Armed Enforcers! On the ground *now*! On the ground! On the ground. Hands behind your head."

The fear etched across the man's features gave way to a deep groan of despair and he obediently dropped to his knees. Kingsley grabbed hold of him round the back of the neck and sent him sprawling, belly down on the bedroom carpet.

"Hands behind your head! Right, now clasp your hands. Clasp your hands together."

There was another in the room, too. A red haired woman. She was still in bed, clutching tight hold of the bedding.

"You!" he yelled, waving his disrupter threateningly. The woman might be armed and this was neither the time nor the place for modesty. "Out of bed. On the floor."

The woman was clearly too terrified to move, clutching the bedding still tighter to her heaving chest, so while Jenkins had her covered, Kingsley snatched hold of the bottom of the duvet, tore it from her frail grasp and cast it into a corner of the room.

"Out of bed!" he yelled again.

The woman lay there dithering, too scared to move or even scream out; so, stepping round the prostrate man, he grabbed hold of her by the arm and manhandled her across the room. Again, naked as she was, the social niceties would have to wait.

"Flat on the ground!" he barked, pushing her down onto her knees. "Hands behind your head!"

The third officer, Malone came forward now. He knelt on the male suspect's legs, wrenched the man's arms behind his back

and fastened his hands together with a stout plastic cable tie. Then Malone turned to the woman and tied her up like a trussed turkey, too.

Kingsley turned to Jenkins and Malone. “Okay, go through to the back and let the others in.”

Finally, Kingsley allowed himself a deep sigh. It came as a relief to him that there hadn’t been a fire fight and that there had been no friendly casualties; and yet he also felt disappointed that these were clearly soft targets, not militant or high ranking dissidents as the informant had wrongly led them to believe. Kingsley also knew full well that it would take a good deal more than this if he were to ever escape the beat and the lesser pond life and finally be promoted to a rare and coveted position in Investigations.

They didn’t find any other occupants in the small flat and, satisfied that the premises were now secure, Jenkins led the suspects out through the front door and into the van and informed the Investigators that it was now safe for them to enter. It was their job to search for evidence; and if they had to tear the flat apart, or dismantle it brick by brick to find evidence, then that is precisely what they would do.

When it came to dealing with feral dissidents, there was only one unwritten law that superseded all others: “*An’ it secure a conviction, do what thou wilt.*” Unlike the common criminal, dissidents were not allowed access to any slick-talking lawyers or social do-gooders, nor were they granted a fair trial by their Hive-abiding peers through the public court system. Instead, they were brought before the Dissidents’ Disciplinary Tribunal (DDT), a specially self-selected panel of experts, and their cases were heard and dealt with in closed session. Little is known about the machinations of the Tribunal, except that they were said to be bound by no regulations or guidelines, and that there was no set sentencing tariff upon conviction, each case being decided solely on its own merit and entirely at the Tribunal’s discretion. Though these people worked in strict accordance with Our Greater Good, they were a law unto themselves and answerable to no-one other than the highest and most remote echelons of Hive Officialdom and, of course, ultimately the Queen Herself – may the Hive bless and keep Her now, as always, and for ever more.

Kingsley and Jenkins stayed behind as the others drove off with the suspects to take them back to the station for interrogation. He wandered idly through the flat as the team of investigators went to work. There was a faintly sweet aroma in the passageway, though he couldn't locate the source. He'd noticed it as soon as he'd entered the apartment, but his mind was, of course, on more immediate matters. Well, if it was some illicit substance, then the Investigators would find it soon enough.

Having said that, the Investigators were there in the flat for over an hour, and in all that time they didn't come across one single anomaly, let alone any contraband material, which was deeply frustrating. All the furniture, the decoration and other household items, right down to the plastic cups and saucers, were of regulation issue; and the paintings, photographs and slogan-bearing posters on the walls were all officially approved. There wasn't a single clue in any of the rooms that the couple were anything but law-abiding people of Hive Mind. The only thing they were pretty sure about was that, judging by the covers, the pair had been sharing the same twin bed; but the Tribunal would not be best chuffed if that was the only, flimsy evidence presented to them. The Tribunal could be as disparaging of the Force as they were with the dissidents, and Kingsley's own captain could be even more caustic when she found herself in the line of fire, was displeased and keen to shift the blame. Kingsley would have gladly faced the dissidents any day than that woman's truly withering glare. All she had to do was look you directly in the eye, and in spite of any rational defence you might have erected, conscience would be triggered and wretched, primeval feelings of guilt, shame and an accompanying rush of adrenaline would be sure to erupt. Captain Mason had an inquisitorial demeanour, and possessed what was known in the job as an All-Seeing Eye. As such, she'd probably have made a very good Investigator, but instead she'd decided years ago to turn her talents to keeping a meticulous eye on the subordinates in her department and on maintaining a tense atmosphere of unyielding discipline.

Rather belatedly, the Investigators decided to call in a dog handler, and when he eventually arrived he let the dog loose in the flat to sniff around wherever its sensitive, trained nose led it. The dog had been having a good sniff around a cupboard under

the stairs, and having found something of potential interest, the dog let out a bark and sat down to await further instructions from its handler.

The man released a catch on the understairs cupboard, encouraging the dog to investigate, and the animal trotted inside, excitedly sniffing and scratching at the floorboards. Rewarding the dog and shooing it out of the way, the handler got down on his hands and knees and examined the area more closely, and then he came across a concealed catch. When he released the catch, the whole section of floorboards swung up on counterweights to rest against the staircase above and, shining a flashlight inside, the man discovered another set of steep, narrow wooden steps leading down.

"Branigan?" he called out to one of the Investigators. "We think we've found what you're looking for."

The Investigator came forward and peered inside the dark hole. He located a light switch on the wall and reached down to turn it on, then descended into what appeared to be a small cellar. His disrupter at the ready, as correct procedure advised, Kingsley followed the man. There was always the chance that more dissidents might be hiding down there, though it seemed unlikely.

The first thing Kingsley noticed, sniffing the air, was that it was laden with some kind of aromatic scent, and beneath that there was a faintly damp and musty smell. Here, then, was the source of the faint aroma he'd sensed earlier. "Joss sticks," the Investigator explained. "They light the sticks and when they burn they give off an aromatic fragrance. It's a sickly stench, if you ask us, but the dissidents seem to favour it. All part of their arcane rituals and dating back to ancient times, so we're told."

Reaching the bottom of the stairs and clicking on an overhead light, the Investigator waved his arms around expansively and turned to Kingsley, a smug grin etched across his fat face. "Well, here we have it. Proof if ever it were needed."

Kingsley looked around. In the centre of the room was a small dining table with ornate legs, made of some highly polished hardwood. On the top of the table there was a tablecloth, edged in lace and fine embroidery. Two places had been set at the table, with what looked like decorated ceramic plates and two crystal cut wine glasses, and a silver candle holder was placed between

the two, with a candle in two of the stems and a ruby red rose and a couple of green leaves in the third.

On one of the walls, there was some kind of old-fashioned wood burning cooking range, with a bright metal flue which reached up into the ceiling. And around the walls were several other pieces of antique furniture and numerous items of contraband, most noticeably a shelving unit filled from top to bottom with books by proscribed authors; a record player and a collection of prohibited music. There were also a number of old paintings on the wall of an erotic or lascivious nature. These people appeared to have no sense of common decency and knew no shame.

Finding prohibited literature or music was easy enough: all one had to do was count the times that the words “I” or “me” were used, or more generally if the content featured or promoted acts of individualism or personal gratification; and that automatically ruled in virtually all publications more than one hundred years old, before the Hive rose to power, and any by independent or underground publishers not granted an official licence by the Board of Media Censors.

However, what was beyond Kingsley was quite why so many of the dissidents should have such an aversion to plastic, which was strong, resilient, easy to keep clean, and – above all else – it was uniform and compliant. They invariably used ceramic, wood, stone or metal substitutes and only used plastic sparingly if there was both a necessity and no alternative, covering up the plastic whenever they could. They’d take an adequate modern television, for example, and build a clumsy wooden case around it. Or cover a perfectly workable plastic surface with elaborately and brightly decorated, hand-crafted fabric or even with sheets of paper, if nothing else were available.

“Yes,” Investigator Branigan nodded, strutting around the room with his head held high. “These are three of the cardinal signs of dissidence, Enforcer Kingsley. We note the absence of official pictures and slogans. This indicates an attempt to reduce or negate the effects of social conditioning. A predilection for antiques indicates a nostalgia for the bad old days before the Hive came to power. And above all, such a predilection indicates an absence of Hive Mind and a presence of Individualism, brought

about by that bane of humanity, Ego. We declare this case not only closed, but locked, barred and bolted.

"There's not the shadow of a doubt in our mind that these are dissidents we're dealing with here, members of the Cult of the Individual; and rest assured that after interrogation, they will receive the appropriate medication together with a strict regime of cognitive reconditioning, if necessary in a penal institution."

"And if that doesn't work?" Kingsley enquired.

The rotund Investigator shrugged his shoulders. "Then it may require a minor though invasive surgical procedure. All it takes is a bit of ferreting about and a snip or two here and there in the brain, or so we are reliably informed. Now, if it's a genetic trait rather than something organic, then they'll be forcibly sterilized to prevent the spread of the infectious disease of Egotism to future generations."

Kingsley pressed the man further on the matter. "And if all else fails?"

The Investigator raised his bushy eyebrows and drew the edge of his hand under his double chin, across his throat, as you might a sharp blade. "We believe that's what is known in common parlance as a 'no brainer', Enforcer Kingsley."

Much as Kingsley despised the ideology and errant behaviour of the dissidents, he could not help but notice that there was not the slightest whiff of pity or regret in the man's voice. He made it all sound so clinical.

"In that unlikely event, for Our Greater Good – the needs of the many outweighing the needs of the few – the dissidents will simply have to be dispatched. That is, of course, the ultimate sanction – and it also serves as a powerful deterrent to others of a similar heretical ilk."

Well, Kingsley mused, either that or it drove them still further underground, making his task all the more fraught with difficulty.

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Kingsley and Jenkins were returning from the scene and heading back to the station. They'd made a slight detour to stop off at a popular roadside stand which sold thick, treacly coffee that was so laden with caffeine that it could have raised the dead, and the best tasting hotdogs you could get in the lower east side of the city.
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As happens all too often, he and Jenkins were just taking their first bites of hotdog when Kingsley heard an alarm go off nearby and he caught sight of a hefty white male making a rapid exit from nearby premises. The man hastily dived into a nearby car, a white convertible, and the car sped away in a screech of tyres. Cursing their luck, Kingsley and Jenkins tossed their plastic coffee cups out through the windows, stashed their half-eaten hotdogs on top of the dashboard, flipped the switch to sound their siren and turn on their flashing lights and took off in pursuit.

With Jenkins driving, Kingsley got straight on the radio. "Alpha One Nine to Control. 406 near the corner of 47 North and 35 East. In pursuit of a heavily built white male suspect driving at speed in a white convertible."

He hung onto the door frame as Jenkins passed a red light and slewed the car round to the right. The car was not too far ahead and the camera finally locked on. He checked the details on the monitor. "Suspect driving at speed, southbound on 48. Registration number alpha papa echo four one nine," he told the operator. "Reported stolen earlier today."

With lock now established, he hit the red button to immobilize the convertible, but the car drove on at high speed.

The speaker crackled and Control acknowledged their call. "Roger, Alpha One Nine. Nearby units have been advised."

Kingsley tapped a few menu options and rewound the video recording. As the suspect emerged from the premises, he froze the frame, drew a rectangle around the man's head and shoulders, expanded the image to full screen and clicked another menu option to run the image through the computer. Within seconds they had a match.

"Alpha One Nine to Control. Suspect is papa lima xray one four six seven Harrison."

He paused while the details were populated on the monitor screen. "Known felon. Two counts of assault and one aggravated burglary."

"Roger, Alpha One Nine. We have the details now. Be advised that the suspect is flagged as a two niner. Repeat, the suspect is a two niner, so approach with caution."

Most two niners were martial artists and it basically meant that the suspect's own arms, legs and maybe his head were to be

considered lethal weapons; and this also gave him and Jenkins the legal authority to use appropriate lethal force if they were so threatened, even if the suspect was not armed.

"Roger that, Control."

The car took the top of a rise and Kingsley was lifted from his seat and banged his head on the thinly padded roof. "Hey, steady on partner. We're planning to make it through to a well-earned retirement."

Down they came with a sickening thump that floored the suspension and left a shower of sparks in their wake. Worst of all, their precious hotdogs hit the deck.

Jenkins stamped on the brakes and Kingsley was forced forward, his seat belt stretching painfully to restrain him. The suspect had not been so lucky. There was a tee junction not many yards over the rise and, unable to control his car, he had ploughed into a brick wall at the far side of the junction, missing a passing bus by the narrowest of margins.

They were out of the car now and heading for the junction, pulling their disrupters and flipping off the safety catches as they ran. Unbelievably, though the bonnet of the car had been concertinaed in the impact, the suspect had physically torn the door off its hinges and was attempting to make a run for it.

"Armed Enforcers!" Jenkins bellowed, and without further warning he fired off a charge from his disrupter, hitting the wall not far ahead of the suspect in a bright blue flash. Still Harrison ran on. He must have weighed in at over two hundred and twenty pounds, but he was no slouch.

Jenkins was close behind him now and he fired off a charge, hitting Harrison on the shoulder blade, but the man merely shrugged it off. Abruptly and unexpectedly, he turned and ran at Jenkins. Kingsley let off a shot, but it missed and struck the wall in a shower of electric blue sparks. Jenkins aimed again and hit Harrison square in the chest, but the man must have been wearing a protective vest, because he didn't even flinch. Coming up on Jenkins, he raised his fist high in the air and brought it crashing down on Jenkins' head and, even though he was wearing a helmet, his legs collapsed beneath him and he slumped to the ground, utterly pole axed.

Harrison was coming at Kingsley now and Kingsley dropped

to his knee and carefully took aim. One charge hit Harrison in the left knee and it buckled beneath him, but he regained his balance and still he came on, dragging his left leg behind him. Again Kingsley fired, hitting the man right in the goolies, which must have brought tears to his eyes. The man cried out in a mixture of pain and rage, but still he refused to be subdued.

Kingsley fired again, hitting the man's right knee and finally he fell headfirst to the ground. Just to be certain, Kingsley let off two more shots, straight in the head.

Once he was sure that Harrison was out for the count, he brought out a bunch of cable ties. Since Harrison was such a brute of a man, he doubled up the cable ties and bound him hand and foot. Another unit had arrived on the scene by now, so Kingsley left them to take care of Harrison while he hurried over to see if Jenkins was alright. Though not as limp wristed as some Kingsley could mention, the man wasn't the most robust Enforcer on the beat. Kingsley had already lost his father and one of his former partners, and he was scared stiff of losing a third. They were warned often enough at boot camp to steel themselves and not to become attached to one-another; but they were all human, they did become attached, and it did hurt when one of their number fell in the line of duty.

Fortunately, Jenkins had regained consciousness by now, though he looked distinctly blurry eyed, so Kingsley got on his radio to call for a paramedic. Being concussed, they'd probably take Jenkins to hospital and keep him in for twenty four hours under observation. Still, it could have been worse. Judging by what he'd seen of Harrison, that hulk of a man, it could have been far worse, if not tragic.

2. The interrogation

When they arrived back at the station, Investigator Branigan turned to Kingsley. “We are eager to get to work on the suspects, Enforcer Kingsley. Have them brought from the cells and taken through to interrogation. We’ll interview them separately, starting with the woman. As the arresting officer, you might like to sit in on the sessions. We gather from your sergeant that you come highly commended, so it will be good for you to get a taste of some more challenging work.”

Well, maybe things were finally looking up after all, Kingsley mused.

Almost as soon as Branigan had started the video recorder and introduced the attending officers and the suspect, there was a loud, staccato rat-a-tat-tat at the door. It was the Chief Investigator. Explaining the interruption for the benefit of the video tape, Branigan left his seat and went outside the room to exchange hushed words with his superior, then returned moments later.

Branigan strode over to the desk, clicked a button to stop the tape and turned to address the woman. She sat there in the white nylon body suit they’d given her to wear, with her arms resolutely and defensively folded, and had yet to utter a single word.

“Thank you, Miss Blake. You are free to go.”

The woman frowned and rose to her feet. “What do you mean, ‘free to go’?” she wanted to know.

For the most fleeting moment, an angry expression crossed the woman’s face, and Kingsley thought she was about to explode in a fit of rage, but instead she quietly sank back down into her seat, smiled and flicked a strand of her long red hair out of her eyes. “That’s quite all right, Mister Investigator. This is surely all for Our Greater Good.”

Branigan nodded in appreciation. “Thank you for your understanding, Miss Blake, and please accept our deepest apologies. It would seem that our intelligence was woefully flawed. Having found no evidence of dissidence, of course no charges will be brought against you or your companion. As we

have said, you are now free to go. We will arrange for an officer to return you and Mister Ventress to your apartment ….”

Blake drew a deep breath. “And what about the damage?” she asked matter-of-factly, though Kingsley could detect a slight edge beneath her apparent calm. This suppressed anger and indignation was surely in itself a sign of the Egotist dissident mentality, or at least some failure in the conditioning process – though of course none of them were perfect in that regard. However, he did not pursue the issue.

“Please accept our apologies, madam. Rest assured that we will immediately arrange for a professional joiner to fit a new door and that you will be financially compensated.”

Again the woman involuntarily bit her lip and forced a smile. “Thank you. All hail the Hive Mind,” she nodded, and again rose to her feet and turned to leave, clearly anxious to be away.

“All hail the Hive Mind,” Branigan echoed, nodding his own head in salute.

As another officer escorted the woman and her male companion from the premises, Kingsley turned to Investigator Branigan. “What’s this all about? We found incontrovertible evidence that they’re dissidents; and even if we hadn’t then the woman would have soon cracked and shown her true Egotistical nature under interrogation. You must have seen for yourself just now that she could barely contain herself. They should be banged to rights.”

“The Chief knows best and she has other plans,” the Investigator replied, tapping the side of his nose with a podgy finger. “Softly softly, catchee monkey, Enforcer Kingsley. These are most likely just small fry – certainly they are amateurs – and we’d gain little by prosecuting them in isolation. So, we do not let on that we found their secret hidey hole. What we do instead is keep the pair under surveillance and see if they lead us to more of their kind, or to bigger fish.”

Well, that made sense, of course, but Kingsley was a little miffed himself. It would have been far more sensible to have simply put the pair under surveillance in the first place and skipped the dawn raid. These people were going to be that much more careful in their dealings with others now, and any further investigation would be correspondingly more difficult.

3. The mission

Several weeks later, just as he was clocking on for a morning shift, Kingsley's pager sounded and he reached in his pocket and checked the glowing display.

Report to room 509, the display read in bright cyan characters. 509 was on the fifth floor of the headquarters, which was solely populated by Special Investigations and generally out of bounds to lesser mortals such as the Enforcers, and that sounded rather ominous; though the terse message offered no further clue as to what the meeting might be about.

Kingsley passed on his apologies to his partner on the way out of the sweaty locker room. "Sorry, something's come up, Jenkins. Been called to a meeting and will be away for a while."

"No problem, Kingsley," the man replied, looking up briefly as he fastened his black, steel-toed boots. "We've got quite a backlog of paperwork to wade through, anyway, that can't be put off for much longer, so we'll get on with that and hit the road later, whenever you get out of the meeting."

When Kingsley swiped his card through the reader in the elevator and tentatively pressed the big blue button marked "5", he expected to be loudly denied access, but it seemed they must have already updated the system. His request was quietly accepted and – with a stomach churning lurch – the elevator accelerated quickly up the side of the building. The lift came to a less than gentle stop at level five and with a pneumatic hiss, the doors slid open. He nervously stepped out, not quite knowing what fate might befall him that day, other than that it must be something important if it couldn't be handled through the official chain of command: directly by his own immediate superior, Sergeant Phelps, by Lieutenant Harding or – if needs be – by Captain Mason. Presumably, that meant that he wasn't facing a disciplinary issue, which came as some slight relief.

Kingsley found room 509 soon enough and he was just straightening his tie and on the point of knocking to announce his arrival when the door slid open.

"Enter," a woman's voice commanded and, drawing a deep

breath, Kingsley pulled himself up straight, marched smartly into the spacious office and, coming to a halt in front of a large desk at the far end, he briskly saluted. He couldn't help but notice that though the desk was clearly made of regulation materials – plain brown plastic – it was far larger than even Captain Mason's. So the lady must be some way up the hierarchical tree. But then, judging by what little he'd heard of their operations, Special Investigations did seem to be a law unto themselves.

"Enforcer Kingsley reporting as requested, Ma'am."

The Special Investigator took off her reading glasses, left her paperwork and looked him up and down.

"At ease, Kingsley." The woman gestured toward a second chair, just to one side of the desk. "Please take a seat."

Kingsley extended a hand, but the Special Investigator did not reciprocate and left his hand dangling, nor did she introduce herself.

"We expect you're wondering why a lowly Enforcer such as yourself has been called here to Special Investigations?" she asked. It was more of a statement than a question.

Kingsley was a little in awe of the Special Investigator and there was a slightly nervous quiver in his voice as he spoke. "Yes, Ma'am."

"Indeed, the same thing occurred to us when your name was put forward. Until we read your file and case notes, that is. You have an exemplary record, Kingsley, and you come highly recommended. As was your father before you, we are led to understand."

"My name was put forward, Ma'am?" he queried.

"Yes. We have a special assignment in mind and we feel that you would be the ideal candidate. You've plodded the beat for long enough, Kingsley, and it is high time that you took a step or two up the ladder."

"Thank you, Ma'am." He was all ears.

"Let's face facts. We've spent far too many years pussyfooting around with the dissidents, Kingsley. Chasing up on informants' leads, bagging the odd minor dissident and sending them off for reconditioning. But in all those years, we've never been able to do much more than scratch the surface of the problem, whilst the contagion has continued to spread."

“Agreed, Ma’am.”

“What we really need to do is to strike at the rotten heart of their operations and take out the ringleaders, Kingsley. And to do that, we need to get our people on the inside of their organization.”

The woman paused for a moment while she applied a spray to freshen her breath.

“You mean undercover, Ma’am?”

“Precisely,” the Special Investigator nodded briskly. “And that, our dear Enforcer Kingsley, is where you come in.”

Kingsley frowned. “But with respect, Ma’am, we know next to nothing about these people.”

The Special Investigator raised her bushy eyebrows. “Enforcer Kingsley, when people say ‘with respect’, all too often they go on to display an utter lack of it.”

“Sorry, Ma’am. What we meant is that we’d stand out like a sore thumb and it wouldn’t take them more than a few minutes to discover that we were ‘Fuss’, to use one of their more polite names for us.”

Again the woman nodded. “Yes, that’s agreed, Kingsley. We are fully aware of the fact that they are far better at recognizing Filth than we are at spotting a Diss, and things will have to change. What is required is expert coaching.”

The Special Investigator swivelled in her chair and pressed a switch on the intercom on her desk. “Show the girl in now, please,” she requested curtly.

Shortly afterwards, the door opened and another officer ushered someone into the office. The girl had long, straggly black hair, she was slightly built and Kingsley thought that she was perhaps in her early twenties. There were dark bags under the girl’s eyes and she looked rather stressed and fearful. The term “hagridden” might perhaps have best described her. Kingsley assumed that Special Investigations must have given her a good working over, over a considerable period of time, and now the girl looked thoroughly broken. Every now and again she’d glance his way with a fearful and haunted look in her deeply set eyes.

“Pull up a chair,” the Special Investigator requested, gesturing to a spare seat against the wall by the door, and the girl silently and nervously complied. Then the Special Investigator

turned back to Kingsley. “Over the course of the next three months, having seen sense at long last and agreed to cooperate with us, Potter here will coach you in the basics.”

“Three months?” Kingsley queried. “With respect, Ma’am, we’ve spent seven years dealing with the dissidents and we still barely know how they operate.”

Again the Special Investigator raised her eyebrows and Kingsley belatedly bit his tongue. “We are not accustomed to being questioned, Enforcer Kingsley, nor to having to repeat ourselves, nor to being interrupted mid-flow. So, if you’ll kindly let us continue ...”

Kingsley hung his head. “Sorry, Ma’am.”

“Potter is to be released and you will be provided with a rent-free apartment, to live with her for a time. Now, every now and again the dissidents hold get-togethers, and once you’ve completed your schooling, Potter here will inform us when the next is to be held and where. You will both attend. When the party is in full swing, Special Investigations will arrange to raid the party. Whereupon, certain contraband materials will be found in your possession and you will be taken to the station, brought up before a judge and given a custodial sentence in a blaze of publicity about how an Enforcer with a hitherto unblemished record had fallen for the lure of Egotistic dissidence, turned native and gone absent without leave. That sort of thing.”

Kingsley had not been expecting that curve ball.

“You’ll be given twelve months inside, with a course of reconditioning for a further twelve months after your release; and whilst inside, you will further coach yourself on the dissidents’ wicked ways and worm your way into their midst. Upon eventual release, you will continue to frequent their company and from time to time you will report back to us with any intelligence that you have garnered.”

“Oh, right,” Kingsley gulped, doing his best to stay calm and not let his growing anxiety show. It was all a done deal, by the sound of it, and there wasn’t really anything else he could say or do to the contrary.

“Finally, Kingsley, when you’ve been released from the undercover work, you will then be assigned to teach other new recruits to follow in your footsteps, so that we can further

infiltrate their clandestine organizations. If it takes from now until Doomsday, Kingsley, we will not let up until we have finally crushed the cancerous resistance."

Kingsley drew a deep breath. "Thank you, Ma'am. All hail the Hive Mind."

The Special Investigator turned to the girl now. "And remember, Potter, if we sense the slightest whiff of betrayal in the air, you know what will happen. We will personally hunt down every single member of your family, including you, and you will all suffer. Rest assured that we will make what little remains of your pathetic lives a living hell. And you will never see your precious toddler, Jonathan again. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Ma'am," the girl nodded vigorously, abject fear etched across her careworn features. "But I want to see my baby."

The Special Investigator shook her head firmly from side to side. "I want never gets, Potter. You really should know that by now."

"Please may we see our baby?" the girl offered instead.

"That's better. Later, Potter, when you've fulfilled your part of our bargain."

The girl appeared genuinely relieved to hear that and her eyes momentarily lit up. "For Our Greater Good, we swear that we won't let you down. All hail the Hive Mind."

"Good. That's a lot better, Potter. We knew that you'd see sense in the end. And, as we promised, if you do what is asked of you, we will do our utmost to make your life more comfortable."

"Yes, thank you, Ma'am. I – I mean we – appreciate your help."

"I? This is the very root of all evil, Potter," the Special Investigator shuddered, reaching for her spray, as if to rid herself of some malodorous aftertaste. "How we detest that vile word. It makes us feel quite nauseous."

The Special Investigator sighed and shook her head sadly. "You know, as we have humbly suggested on innumerable occasions, a simple surgical procedure during infancy – or better still, genetic engineering beforehand – really would save us no end of bother and grief. But do the Powers That Be take heed? We might as well be whispering in the wind for all the good it does."

She turned away and clicked a switch on her desk top

intercom. “Morrison? You can come in now.”

Again the door opened and another plainclothed officer entered. The man was quite tall and as skinny as a drain pipe, and he had a long neck and alert, penetrating eyes. He resembled a bird of prey, ready to swoop down on its victim at any moment.

The Special Investigator rose to her feet. “Right then, let battle commence. If you two would care to go with Morrison, you can get to know one-another a little better.”

Kingsley was a little puzzled. “What about my partner? Shouldn’t we let him know?”

The Special Investigator smiled. “Don’t worry about that, Kingsley. We’ll handle all the necessary arrangements.”

“And my apartment?”

“As we said, we’ll handle it,” she reiterated. “You need not concern yourself with any such details. Now off you go before we have second thoughts.”

“Yes, Ma’am. All hail the Hive Mind.”

“All hail,” the woman echoed a little half-heartedly as the officer ushered them out of the room, before replacing her reading glasses and wearily returning to her deep and growing pile of paperwork.

“It’s all for the Greater Good, Ma’am,” Kingsley observed as he turned away, and yet deep down inside another part of him was tempted to ask “Is it? Is it really a worthy cause? You know, sometimes even *I* have my moments, and wonder.”

“Out,” came the abrupt reply.

Kingsley hastily pushed that heretical thought from his mind, and gave himself a mental slap in the face and a good stern talking to.

4. AWOL

Special Investigator Morrison led them down a long, brightly lit corridor and ushered them into a small room. With the exception of a long table at the far end, a couple of hardback chairs and a stretch of ill-fitting linoleum on the floor, the room was empty. There was a small fluorescent strip light in the ceiling behind protective metal mesh and it had an annoying flicker.

"Off with your things. We'll be back in a minute," the officer requested curtly and, leaving them at the door, he went off down the corridor.

Kingsley went over to the table and took off his headset, utility belt and holster, carefully arranging the items on the table top; then unzipped his jacket, neatly folded it and placed it beside the other items.

By this time, not being encumbered by such paraphernalia, the girl had unzipped the white nylon overalls that she'd been issued with, let the overalls slip to the floor, deftly stepped out of them, tossed the clothes on the table, and stood there stark naked, as if she did not have a care or moral scruple in the world.

"Do you mind?" Kingsley enquired, when he'd recovered his composure.

"Not at all. Do *you*?" was the girl's insolent reply.

"Less of the lip," Kingsley retorted grumpily.

He turned away whilst he took off his boots, hopping around on one foot and clutching the edge of the table for support. Then he unzipped his trousers, before neatly folding them and adding them to the pile. He stood there, feeling uncomfortable in his regulation issue white vest and pants.

"Lesson number one, Mister Enforcer," Potter informed him: "There is nothing inherently shameful about the adult human body. Rather, it is a gift to be enjoyed and celebrated."

For a dissident, Potter spoke with an unusually refined accent, and she sounded to be well educated. It was also clear to Kingsley now, by this show of confidence, that the girl hadn't been quite as deeply hurt by what had befallen her whilst in custody as she had earlier made out. Either that or she was now

putting on a brave face. Well, she might have fooled the Special Investigator, but she didn't fool him for one moment.

"If you say so."

The girl laughed: "I'm sorry, here we are in the altogether and we haven't even been properly introduced. I'm Holly Potter."

"What's *holly*?" he wanted to know.

"It's a plant that grows in nature," the girl explained. "With apologies for its prickly nature. Now, I know that this might seem strange to you, but we don't precede our family names with our occupation; nor do we precede our occupation with 'Mister'. At birth, our parents give us personal names; or we adopt new personal names if we later convert to dissidence."

To Kingsley, such a thing was almost unthinkable.

She came forward with her arm extended and, involuntarily averting his eyes, he turned and returned the handshake, then turned away again. "Enforcer Kingsley," he returned defiantly.

"Not any more, you're not," Morrison informed him as he returned to the room with a tall pile of fresh clothing and placed it on the table. "It's Rowan Kingsley from now on."

Kingsley turned to the girl for clarification.

"Rowan is a type of tree," she explained. "It bears edible orange-red, berry-like fruit. I like it, Rowan. It's a good name for you. Some call it Witchbane."

"And the rest," Morrison requested, craning his long neck and looking Kingsley up and down with disdain.

"The rest of what?" Kingsley enquired.

"The vest and pants," Potter suggested. "They have Enforcement written all over them."

Again Kingsley turned away from the girl and complied with the order. She came forward and lightly slapped him on the butt.

"What was that for?" he wanted to know.

Again the girl laughed. "I was just being playful," she replied, as if that explained anything. "You have such a lot to learn, Rowan Kingsley. And a great deal more to *unlearn*."

"What do you mean, 'not any more, you're not'?" Kingsley enquired, when he was dressed again in the civilian clothes, matching plain black trouser suits, that the Special Investigator had provided.

Morrison slapped two brown manilla folders down on the

table top. “It’s all explained in your files, so study them well. As of this moment, Kingsley, you are officially AWOL, and if you are spotted in the street you are liable to be arrested. So we’re going to have to sneak you out of here using one of the service elevators. We have an unmarked van waiting for you in the basement car park and you’ll be taken to your new abode. And you are not to set foot outside the apartment until you’re thoroughly *au fait* with your new identity and Potter here has coached you in the dissident ways. Is that clear, Kingsley?”

“Crystal clear, Sir,” Kingsley replied, nodding his head in salute and clicking his heels together.

“And you’re going to have to stop doing that straight away, Rowan,” the girl observed. “That kind of mannerism stinks of Fuss, and it could cost you your life. Regrettably, some of the dissidents, as you contemptuously refer to us, are somewhat more militant than my kind.”

“Sorry.”

Potter smiled at him. “Oh, don’t worry, Rowan: we’ll soon have you loosened up.”

“Loosened up? Don’t you mean straightened out?”

The girl shook her head resolutely. “On the contrary, Rowan, you’re already altogether too straightlaced for your own good, or for that of anyone else unfortunate enough to be associated with you. So the last thing you need is to be straightened out still further.”

He looked to Morrison to help him out, but the man merely shrugged. “It’s all in a Good Cause.”

What Morrison really meant was “better you than me, old chap, that’s all I can say”; but of course the man couldn’t voice such a selfish sentiment, even in jest. You see, the conditioning didn’t fully extinguish the Ego; it merely relegated it to a minor position and held it in restraint.

“Yeah, yeah,” Kingsley sighed. “Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy.”

Potter smiled at him. “I see you still have the vestiges of a sense of humour, Rowan. Now that’s a good thing to hang onto. You may well need every last ounce of it when you’re sent down. As we dissidents say, ‘Fear is the lock and laughter the key.’ It’s a powerful thing to be able to laugh in the face of danger, and you

never know, it may just save your life."

Being sent down was a prospect that Kingsley was not at all looking forward to. He'd heard some real horror stories about life inside.

5. A change of abode

Potter had been arrested in a small town to the north and, like Kingsley, she had been abruptly relocated to the city, her own possessions having by then been confiscated and lost to her. The small, one bedroomed apartment they'd been given was one that had been occupied by dissidents before their arrest and incarceration, and fortunately all the previous tenants' furniture and possessions had been left behind untouched, so he and Potter didn't have to start again and build their lives from scratch.

On the surface, it looked like the apartment of any other Hive-abiding citizens. Everything on view in the apartment was of mass produced, regulation issue, right down to the plastic handled cutlery.

However, as Morrison had demonstrated, there was more to the apartment than met the casual or untutored eye. The far wall of the lounge was taken up in its entirety by a brown plastic wall unit. On the left, nearest the windows, were cupboards and a niche large enough to take a television; and on the right were several bookshelves, populated by suitably approved, compliant titles. But if you withdrew two fat volumes of an encyclopedia from one of the shelves, and felt inside, you'd find a hidden catch behind the books. And if you released this catch and pulled at the plastic frame, the whole bookcase swung out into the room on concealed hinges. Though the flat was too confined to hide a secret room, there was space enough behind the bookcase to house a second set of narrow shelves and cupboards, and indeed this is where the contraband was stored.

Once Morrison had gone and left them to it, Potter securely locked the front door behind him and checked the lounge windows. Fortunately, the previous occupants had installed translucent curtains and she was satisfied that there was no possibility of their being overlooked by nosey neighbours.

It was quite late in the day by now and neither of them had eaten since breakfast, so they went through to the kitchenette to see what they could rustle up. Potter retrieved a brightly decorated, floral apron from the cubbyhole and had it tied around

her waist.

The woman unpacked the food that Morrison had left them, then checked through the kitchen cupboards and refrigerator to see if any other food had been. She heaved a deep sigh.

"What's wrong, Potter?" he asked.

The girl turned around to face him, sleeves rolled up, hands on hips and a very business-like expression etched on her features. "Let's get one thing straight, Mister. I'm the coach here and you're the student, so what I say goes. Right?"

"Right, Potter."

"Wrong, Rowan," she retorted. "If you're to pass muster amongst the dissidents, you're going to have to get into our way of doing things. So you don't call me Potter. You call me by my personal name, Holly."

"Right, Holly."

"Well, that's a start, Rowan, but it's still not quite right. When you address me, you need to drop the oh-so-official and disdainful tone and express the affection you have toward me. I'm meant to be your lover, remember, not your co-worker or snout. And you can also use other terms of endearment like darling and sweetheart."

"Sweetheart?" he frowned. "We're sorry ..."

"Not we're sorry, Rowan: *I'm* sorry," she corrected, giving him a gentle clip round the ear. He assumed that this was also what she termed being playful.

"*I'm* sorry, Potter – I mean, I'm sorry, Holly – but we don't even know what that means."

"*I* don't even know what that means," she corrected him a second time and he dodged out of the way this time before she clipped his ear. "What you mean is 'It does not compute'. Heavens, Rowan, what are you, a man or a machine?"

The girl breathed another deep sigh. "I can see that this is going to be a challenging assignment for the both of us." Then she lightened up. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bark at you. Hey, Rowan, don't worry. It's still early days for us, and I'm sure we'll make a great team once we've got a few wrinkles ironed out."

"Anyhow." The girl went back to the refrigerator, pulled out a couple of cartons and checked the use by date on the back. "I'm

sorry, but it looks like we'll have to manage with this ready meal tonight. What Morrison left for us is next to useless. The man simply has no idea. Anyhow, chicken or beef: take your pick."

"Beef would suit me fine," Kingsley nodded.

"Two things, Rowan. The first is that that is the wrong answer. The correct answer is to ask the other person which they'd prefer."

"Yes, you just did," Kingsley replied. "And I said beef."

"Let me rephrase that, Rowan. The chivalrous and gallant answer – especially by a gentleman to a lady, a youngster to an elder or a host to a guest – is to give the other person the first choice by asking them which they'd prefer."

"Chivalrous?" he queried.

"I know, don't tell me: This does not compute." The girl shrugged her shoulders. "Whatever, it's all grist for the mill and something else we can work on later."

"And the other thing, Holly?" Kingsley queried.

Holly scratched her chin thoughtfully. "Other thing? I'm sorry, but I've lost my train of thought in all the excitement."

"You said that there were two things wrong with having a ready meal."

She nodded. "Oh yeah. Well you see, Rowan, this kind of food is just processed junk. It's not good for your body. But above all, nor is it good for your mind."

Kingsley looked askance. "How so?"

"Well, first off, it's got very little nutritional value."

"Sure, I can see that," he nodded, though truth be told, he very rarely read the list of ingredients.

"Secondly, there are certain chemicals which are used in the production to colour, flavour or preserve the food; and also chemicals that are used in the plastic packaging of the food and which seep into that food."

"Is that a bad thing?" he asked.

"Very bad, Rowan. Especially the chemicals used in the plastic."

Something dawned on Kingsley at that moment. "So that's why dissidents avoid the use of plastic or cover it up, right?"

"Exactly, Rowan. Now you're learning. Some of the chemicals affect brain chemistry and mess with the mind. They

subdue, dumb down, assist in the conditioning process and make people more compliant."

"We see," Kingsley nodded, and for the first time he actually did. "I mean, *I* see."

Holly smiled and gently stroked his arm. "Yes, Rowan, I believe that you do see.

"But back to the chemical goo. That would be bad enough if it were merely accidental; but it's not, you see. The Powers That Be know full well what's going on and worse than doing nothing about it, they actually secretly encourage such use. And, what's more, even the tap water is unsafe to drink unfiltered these days."

"It's surely for Our Greater Good," he contested.

"According to the Powers That Be it is, Rowan. You know, they speak of Hive Mind, but really when you delve more deeply, you'll find that it's more a case of the farmyard or the ant heap."

Kingsley stood his ground. "Holly, sweetheart, please don't take me for a fool. If you are attempting to convert me, let me assure you: it will not happen."

Holly clapped her hands together and abruptly broke Kingsley's train of thought. "Anyhow, Rowan, while I heat up the meal, be a dear and have a rummage in the cubbyhole. Find a tablecloth and bring out a couple of the ceramic plates, cups, saucers and cutlery."

Kingsley complied and returned to the kitchenette to lay the table, under Holly's expert guidance. "No, Rowan," she told him, shaking her head, "*You* may scrape up your food using a fork in your right hand like a shovel or mechanical digger; but whilst I'm here, we'll use a knife and fork, like good old-fashioned, civilized folk. Trust me: you don't want to look like you're back in the Service works canteen."

Holly seemed to catch herself and softened her tone. She tenderly stroked his arm. "Anyhow, that's a job well done, my sweetheart, thank you.

"Now, in case I forget, remind me that bright and early tomorrow morning I must hunt through the city to see if I can find someone who sells decent fresh food to cook from scratch. It's not going to be easy, and it may take me a while, because I don't as yet have any dissident contacts in this city. That's one thing that the Fuss couldn't set up for us."

“But how will you find others?” Kingsley wanted to know.

“Oh there are signs, sweetheart, if you know where to look and what to look for,” Holly reliably informed him.

He raised his eyebrows. “Can you make me a list?”

“No, I cannot,” she replied, shaking her head firmly. “It’s doesn’t work like that, Rowan. In fact, it’s a lot more arcane. It’s something that’s *caught* more than *taught*. I guess you could write an A to Z *of* dissidence, but it wouldn’t help you out one iota about what it’s like to actually *be* dissident. Just as the idea of an orange is not the same as its smell or taste, there’s a still further range: the experience of actually eating the orange and benefiting from it.”

“I’m not quite with you,” he replied, rather puzzled by Holly’s response.

“You could say that we simply recognize one-another, Rowan. And that’s the chief reason that we really need to work on schooling you – and ultimately that depends on involving you and engaging you in dissidence. And I tell you, sweetheart, there are few harder, more wearing tasks in the world than having to pretend to be what you are not, in order to comply with societal – or in your case, dissident – mores. This causes real inner conflict, which wastes a great deal of psychic and emotional energy that might be more productively used elsewhere.”

At that moment, the microwave oven pinged and again Holly clapped her hands. “Right, Rowan, that’s more than enough philosophy for now. Such as it is, let’s grab this food whilst it’s still warm.”

Once dinner was out of the way, Kingsley helped Holly tidy up in the kitchen. He was just about to stack the plates in the dishwasher, but Holly stopped him.

“No, no,” she insisted.

“Oh come on, Holly. Everyone who is anyone uses a dishwasher and other labour saving devices in these modern times,” he protested.

“And anyone with a mind of their own and a brain not on autopilot would see the folly of that,” Holly countered. “There are only one or two things, so I’ll wash them by hand and you can hand dry them with a tea towel. It will only take a few minutes, it’ll save a great deal of water and electricity, and the exercise

will do you good."

"It's hardly exercise, Holly," he scoffed.

"Listen, tough guy, exercise isn't all about physical muscles, you know," Holly replied pointedly. "Or on second thoughts, perhaps you don't know. Those who don't know – and know that they don't know – can always be helped. So think on, Rowan Kingsley. Now find a tea towel and make yourself useful.

"Oh and another thing, Rowan," Holly added, standing there with her hands on her hips. "When you've used the loo, the polite thing to do is to lower the seat for the ladies. And also, when you've finished with the toothpaste, please replace the cap."

"Sheesh woman, don't you ever let up? What did your last slave die of? No, don't tell me: it certainly wasn't through boredom, that's for sure!" He threw his arms in the air in exasperation, turned on his heel and headed for the living room muttering to himself under his breath.

"One day, you're gonna thank me," she called after him, with a confident lilt in her voice.

"Yes, Sergeant Major," he returned. It was like being back in ruddy boot camp. But, of course, the sergeant major had eventually been proved right, much as he'd detested the evil little four-eyed man at the time.

After they were done and Holly had brewed a coffee, they sank down on the settee to let their dinner settle and relax for a time. Kingsley had found the remote control and was idly flicking through the television channels searching for something worth watching, but Holly snatched the controller from him and tossed it to one side.

"Hey come off it, Holly," he protested.

"If you want to infiltrate the dissidents, you're going to have to start thinking and acting like one, Rowan," she informed him sternly. "The media – and especially the television, since these days it's so 'in your face' all day long – is full of propaganda and subtle conditioning. And that's really not going to help right now. It will simply undo any progress we make together."

"Okay, you're the boss," he shrugged.

"Damn right I am, Mister," the girl laughed, reaching over to tickle his ribs until he was squirming, begging for mercy and crying out for her to stop. The Investigators might have had better

results if they'd resorted to tickle torture instead of applied psychology, pain and reward, because the dissidents were notoriously hard to crack.

Holly got up and went to switch on the radio, winding the dial through a number of channels like the Religious Channel which was playing that rousing hymn *Hive of Plenty*, until she found the station she was looking for. Having adjusted the volume, she returned to the settee and settled back down.

There was a song playing on the radio and when it dawned on Kingsley what they were singing about, and with such a lascivious choice of words, he sat bolt upright and turned to Holly. "What on earth is going on?" he wanted to know.

Holly slapped her thigh and laughed. "Relax, Rowan. It's not one of the approved FM stations. This is the old AM range and it's one of the pirate stations."

"Well, I'm surprised that the authorities haven't shut it down," he huffed.

"They're operating from a ship miles off the coast, Rowan, and they keep moving around, so there's really not a lot that the authorities can do about it. Every time the Powers That Be shut down one station, another simply pops up elsewhere."

Holly moved closer to him on the settee and gently patted his arm. "Anyhow, Mister Enforcer, I think that it's time you clocked off for the day, don't you? Simply sit back, relax and enjoy the music."

The irony was not lost on Kingsley and he raised his eyebrows. "You might take your own advice, lady."

"Ooh, touché!" she laughed.

"Come on, admit it: I got you there," he pressed.

Holly held her hands up in mock surrender and put on a husky voice. "Alright, Governor. It's a fair cop."

At that point, a thought must have occurred to Holly. "Won't be a minute, Rowan, so don't go away."

She sprang from the settee, went across to the shelves and rummaged around in the secret cupboards for a time, then she headed for the kitchen.

While Holly was away, tired after the long day, Kingsley had begun to drift off into sleep.

"Hey, sleepy head," Holly greeted him on her return, and she

shook him by the arm to rouse him.

"What's the matter, don't you like my company?" the girl laughed, pulling up an occasional table by the settee before disappearing into the kitchen again. She returned with a couple of glasses, filled almost to the brim with some kind of amber liquid, and held one out for him to take before sitting down beside him.

Holly reached over and gently clinked her glass against his, so that they chimed together. "Cheers," she smiled, taking a sip of her own drink. "It's an old folk custom, from a time when people still believed in good luck, magic, fairies at the bottom of the garden and other benevolent, guiding spirits," she explained. "You clink your glasses together and salute one-another with 'Cheers' or 'Bottoms up' or 'Your good health'. Go on, you give it a try."

Kingsley tentatively moved his glass close to Holly's, being careful not to spill the drink, and gently clinked his glass against hers. "Cheers," he smiled.

"Cheers, Rowan," she echoed, taking another sip of her drink. "Your good health."

"What is it?" he wanted to know, taking a sip. The drink had a fruity taste and it felt quite warm and fiery on the way down.

Then a terrible thought occurred to him and he put his glass down on the table beside the settee. "It's alcohol, isn't it? Heavens, woman, whatever were you thinking?"

Holly shook her head. "Rowan Kingsley, I thought I told you earlier to hang up your uniform, and yet I see that you're still wearing it. Now listen to me: if you intend mixing with the dissidents, then you'd better get used to alcohol and get used to handling yourself when you're under the influence of alcohol. Don't worry, it'll just make you feel slightly squiffy, but taken in moderation, it won't rot your liver or your Hive-like mind. Now pick up your glass and have another sip."

"Squiffy?" he queried.

"Drunk," she explained. "Loosened up, care free and merry."

Kingsley took another sip and a third.

"Don't swallow it straight away," Holly advised. "Roll the drink around in your mouth and savour it before you swallow."

He took a fourth sip and did his best to comply.

"Don't worry, Rowan, it'll come naturally soon enough.

Anyhow, excuse me for a minute or two and I'll be back."

Another light seemed to have come on in Holly's head and she was rummaging in the secret cupboards again. Heaven only knows what she'd would come up with next. She was like a conjurer pulling rabbits and doves and bunches of flowers from her magic hat. Clutching something to her chest, Holly disappeared into the bedroom.

When ten minutes had passed and Holly still hadn't reappeared, Kingsley stood up. It even crossed his mind that she might have pulled a flanker on him and done a runner. Only then did he realize that he was feeling a little lightheaded and slightly unsteady on his feet. Presumably this was what it felt like to be "slightly squiffy". Either that or he'd been drugged.

"Are you alright in there, Holly? Do you need any help?" he called out in a loud, anxious voice.

"Yes, I'm fine, Rowan," the girl called back. Her voice sounded soften now and more melodic. "I'll just be a couple of minutes, so be a dear: go through to the kitchen and top up our glasses, would you?"

When Kingsley returned from the kitchenette, walking slowly so as not to spill the drinks, he found Holly already sitting there on the settee, and he was astonished to see her utterly transformed. As he carefully set the drinks down on the table, his hands trembling with suppressed excitement, she stood up and gave him a twirl.

When Holly had entered the bedroom, she had been wearing her baggy, regulation black trouser suit and now she wore a brightly patterned ankle length skirt with an elasticated waist, and a loose top to match. And judging by the way she joggled about in her top and her nipples formed a clear outline in the material, Holly had dispensed with her regulation issue padded bra.

"Do you mind?" he enquired, and he reached forward to run his fingers over her sleeve. "It's not nylon. What kind of material is this?"

"It's cheesecloth, which is cotton," the girl informed him. "And it's not made of plastic but grown in fields the old-fashioned way and spun into thread which is woven and then the pattern is printed on the material."

Holly had moved closer to him as she spoke, so close in fact,

that he could feel her warm breath on his face and smell her scent – another banned substance. “What’s that fragrance?” he wanted to know.

“It’s made from the essence of rose blossoms,” she told him.

He backed away nervously, sat back down on the settee and handed Holly her drink. His hand was trembling quite markedly by now and he had to be especially careful as they clinked their glasses together.

“Why, Rowan, your hands are trembling,” Holly noted and she clasped his hand in hers. “My, my. Fancy that: a big brave man like you all a-quiver, over a sweet and innocent little thing like me,” she added with a wry smile.

“It’s most likely the alcohol,” he replied, pulling his hand away. “And let me remind you: it will take far more than this to turn me, if that’s your game. You don’t fool me for an instant, young lady.”

Holly shook her head. “No, Rowan, it’s not the drink. If anything, that will help to relax you. It’s just that you are so unaccustomed to being in the presence of a lady of the opposite sex and, quite understandably, you’re excited. It’s what dissidents term being ‘turned on’.”

Kingsley edged a little further away. “The pursuit of individualist or sensual gratification is a sin against Hive Mind,” he protested.

Holly laughed and, moving closer, she ran her fingers over his chest. “That’s codswallop. And if you’re truly honest with yourself, if not with me, you know it.”

Kingsley looked askance. “What’s codswallop?”

“I mean that it’s absolute nonsense and you know that deep down, Rowan. That’s just your conditioned mind talking – the buffoon whom you’ve foolishly elected to be the spokesperson for the madcap circus you’re running. Just like the Hive itself, inside your head it’s all the idiots and the scaremongers who are in charge. If you were to take away the Hive Mentality that’s artificially binding them together, you’d find that they’ve each got their own myopic and uncoordinated agenda. And if you actually did that, and all the stage scenery in this ghost town collapsed around you, you really would be left wondering ‘*Who the hell am I?*’”

Kingsley could feel a lump welling up in his throat and he was visibly shaken. “Sheesh woman, you don’t pull your punches, do you? That was some seriously heavy duty shit you just laid on me.”

“Your friend Morrison doesn’t know the half of it,” Holly smiled enigmatically. She reached over to the table and fetched their drinks. “Here, get the rest of this down your neck and then I think that we should turn in for the night. I have an early start tomorrow.”

Holly downed her own drink and then jumped up from the settee and went through the flat making sure that everything was locked up and turned off, then she went to pick up the empty glasses to wash and dry before returning them to the cupboard and making sure that the bookcase was safely back in place. Chances were that they were safe from raids, but it was always best to err on the safe side of caution.

“Come on, up you get sleepy head,” Holly requested as she returned, and she gently tugged him to his feet and led him through to the bedroom. She was glad now that she’d put clean sheets on the obligatory twin beds earlier, as by now she was indeed feeling more than a little squiffy herself.

Going to have one last check around the apartment to make sure all incriminating evidence had been removed, she did indeed find a piece of stray tinfoil that had covered the cork on the wine bottle before she’d opened it. Small this might have been, but insignificant it most certainly was not, so she had no choice really but to open up the bookcase and stash it inside. This was the kind of habit that had to become thoroughly engrained and second nature, so that you could carry it out on autopilot when you were blind drunk, just as a recruit might be taught to disassemble and reassemble a gun whilst blindfolded; and the more one practised, the better one became.

By the time Holly had returned to the bedroom, she found that Rowan had already undressed and – quite unlike the typical man – she noted that he’d very carefully folded his clothes on the bedside chair. He’d even tucked one sock inside the other, as you might after doing the laundry, so that strays would not be lost and orphaned. Again, like the nod in salute, this was a dead giveaway, and so she made a special effort to disarrange his neat pile before

getting undressed and climbing into her own bed.

Rowan was fast asleep and away with the fairies, snorting and snoring from time to time, and murmuring in his dreams. However, for no doubt obvious reasons Holly seemed to have a lot on her mind that night and, tossing and turning, she found it hard to get to sleep. Half way through the night, she decided to get up and went through to the kitchenette to make herself a warm mug of milky cocoa.

Her fellow dissidents would often get up in the middle of the night and even socialize after their first sleep, then return later for their second sleep; though this ancient practice was something that the rest of humanity had long forgotten as they went about their clockwork lives.

Holly suddenly stopped in her tracks and flushed with embarrassment. Only then did it occur to her that she hadn't been round the apartment checking for hidden cameras and bugs. She really wouldn't put anything past the spooks at Special Investigations, all the more so since they were the ones who'd decided where she and Rowan were to shack up. Special Investigations were pussycats compared to some, though. The worst were in Rehabilitation and for them she reserved the word "Creeps". They had severely messed with the minds of several of her former friends. Their methods were especially crude and most of these former friends were now born again model citizens; lobotomized; or burnt out shells.

She waved her hands in the air and gave any potential eavesdroppers the middle finger. Bugged or not, the search would have to wait until morning. Oh dear, until even earlier than her intended trip into the city.

Returning to the bedroom with the half-consumed cocoa in her hand, she put her mug down on her bedside cabinet and went to tuck in Rowan's sheets. And then, on the spur of the moment, she changed her mind. Drawing back one edge of the sheet, she climbed in and snuggled up in the warmth beside him, and within moments, even before she'd remembered to finish off her cocoa, Holly fell into a deep and contented sleep.

At about six o'clock that morning she heard a sudden gasp and woke instantly; and seconds later Rowan snatched his hand from her breast and sat up in bed, muttering incoherently about

carnal relations, sin, hellfire and damnation. She grabbed hold of Rowan's muscular arm, pulled him back down in bed and pressed the tips of her fingers to his mouth, and after some more protestation, he finally fell silent. Running her hand through his soft brown hair, she drew his head toward her and they kissed. At first he lay there like a stuffed dummy not knowing how to respond, but with a little encouragement, he quickly got the hang of kissing. Or at least Rowan figured out the mechanics: he was still so emotionally detached.

Again Rowan's large hand brushed over her chest and he involuntarily pulled back, but taking his hand in hers, she returned it to her heaving breast and encouraged him to explore and lick his tongue around until, turned on herself, her nipples were flushed with blood and stood proud and erect. It was strange, because she could see that the mind conditioning was holding him back, and yet his deep breathing and emotional arousal was giving out an altogether different, almost diametrically opposed message. She could feel Rowan pressing up against her and there was no mistaking the fact that he was rising to the occasion, nor denying the unmistakable warm, moist yearning in her own loins. It was as if instead of merely subduing the Ego, the conditioning had created some kind of split personality that was forever skirmishing or at war with itself. The source of all worldly conflict had its origins in the psyche, of course, and it seemed that whilst the Hive Mentality had reduced that outward conflict, it was still being fought out, but now it was being fought even more within the individuals in the Hive.

This was a seminal moment for Rowan in a sacred initiation or rite of passage, and if he was to penetrate the dissident movement, it was vital that he should not falter or turn back at this point. With this in mind, Holly grabbed hold of Rowan, pulled him on top of her and, offering him a guiding hand, she let him into her inner sanctum. Clasping hold of his behind and pulling him toward her and deep within her, they made passionate love. Then later, when Rowan had recovered from his exertions and she had once more gained his full attention, he voluntarily came back for second helpings, calling her "sweetheart" and sounding like he really meant it. In that delicious, glorious, tingling moment, when they both climaxed in unison and felt at

one with the universe, Holly knew that they had bonded and that she had succeeded in the first stage of her task.

And afterwards, for a few minutes before the alarm clock sounded, she lay quietly cradled in Rowan's strong arms, their skin still glistening with perspiration and delightfully warm to the touch, her head swimming in a cocktail of hormones and brain chemicals and basking in the delicious afterglow.

"Oh, blast it," Holly cursed as all too soon the alarm clock sounded. The alarm was so painfully discordant and insistent and grated on her nerves to such an extent that it simply could not be ignored for more than a few brief seconds.

She reached out, quickly silenced the wretched device and pushed herself out of bed before she fell for the temptation to snatch just a few more minutes' sleep. Oh, for the good life before the Hive had risen to power, when people's lives weren't so tightly regulated and run on clockwork but instead followed a more natural circadian rhythm. That was a time when lives were driven by simple pleasures as well as real human needs, and not by the dispassionate mechanical desires of the system in furtherance of its own ends.

Rowan had stirred, but had fallen back asleep again, so she left him to enjoy a little more well deserved sleep, pulled on her fluffy white cotton bathrobe and headed for the kitchen to down a mug of strong coffee before taking a shower.

Then, having got dressed and made a second mug of strong coffee, Holly went through to gently rouse Rowan.

"Wakey, wakey, sleepy head," she lilted, going over to open the bedroom curtains and flooding the room with light.

Rowan sat up in bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Morning," he murmured.

"There's a coffee for you on your bedside table, sweetheart," she informed him, giving him a friendly peck on the cheek as she passed.

Rowan was half out of bed now and still not quite in the land of the living. "Woss up?" he wanted to know.

"No, no. Stay there and enjoy your coffee, Rowan. You don't have work to go to, and there's no rush. Just get up when you feel like it."

The man required no further encouragement. He got back in

bed and reached out for his drink, and she left him to it. First thing after breakfast, she'd have a good look round the flat to make sure Special Investigations hadn't left any eavesdropping devices; then she must head into the city to see if she could make contact with any other dissidents and rustle up some real food.

Had they been living in the country, they could have grown their own of course; but here in the city they'd be wholly reliant on the black market. The dissident black market, that was. There were also corrupt and criminal elements offering such services, but these came at a high price and she and her kind would have nothing to do with the Crims. Many of these people had no conscience or moral scruples and they'd be all smiles and take your money in one moment and sell you down the river in the next.

Of course, not all criminals were psychopaths and not all psychopaths were criminal. But there was one point about which the dissidents and the Establishment could perhaps agree? Psychopaths were present at all levels of society and a disproportionate number of them – especially the charismatic who hid their evil nature so well – held positions of influence and power in the Hive. However, whilst a dissident could always be reconditioned; by and large there was still no known cure for that true bane of society.

As Holly finished her sweep of the apartment, fortunately without finding any bugs, Rowan emerged from the bedroom wrapped in a bathrobe that she'd found for him, and she left what she was doing and went over to give him a hug. He accepted the hug but didn't really return it, and she could see that they still had a great deal of work before them before he'd truly begin to pick and choose for himself and to loosen up.

Holly looked at her watch and shrugged. "Well, sweetheart, time's pressing and I need to go into the city. Wish me luck."

"Good luck," he nodded.

She guided Rowan through to the kitchen. "Just take whatever you need. There's not much coffee left, but help yourself. I'll bring a few supplies back with me. Grab a shower and breakfast. And while I'm away, feel free to laze about and listen to the radio, or whatever turns you on."

Holly caught sight of herself in the wall mirror and she was

shocked to see the dark rings under her eyes and just how stressed she looked. Of course it was nothing that a little makeup wouldn't cover up. However, the Hive had even banned cosmetics now. In some ways that was a good thing, because she was all for the natural look; but there were times like this when a little foundation wouldn't go amiss and she'd have liked to have had the choice. Well, there was no point in getting herself worked up or depressed about that.

"Anyway must dash, so I'll love you and leave you and see you later. I'll most likely be back mid-afternoon," she smiled, giving Rowan a peck on the cheek as he followed her back into the living room. And with that, she was out of the door and off downstairs with a spring in her step.

6. The big city

If there was one thing that Holly hated as much as the Hive Mentality, it was the endless homogeneous concrete, steel and glass of the modern day city and the rigid way in which the streets were laid out in an arithmetic grid. She felt so anonymous and insignificant, overawed and lost amidst the bustling crowds.

Of course there was an up-side to having numbered streets: not knowing the city and not having a map, it would be that much easier to get her bearings, follow any directions she was given, and find her way safely back home again. If you were on “Mill Hill” and needed to get back home to “Acacia Avenue”, you might find yourself in difficulties, since there was no mental picture as yet established between the two. But with numbers, it was simply a matter of pointing yourself in the right direction and infallibly counting off the numbered street signs as you went until you arrived at your destination. But then where was the fun and the challenge in that? You could probably train a rat or a robot to do that much.

What bothered her more than anything was that virtually all the wonderfully quirky and individualist remnants of the preceding civilization had been torn down and built upon by the time she was a young child. Now they lived on only in the hearts and minds of the dissidents, and especially the elders, and in what literature, photographs, paintings, other works of art and craft and traditions that they’d managed to secretly preserve.

Holly had mixed feelings about this. The destruction and the impositions of the Hive Mentality greatly saddened her; and yet the efforts of the dissidents to preserve the old ways also gave her hope and heartened her and raised her spirits. The dissidents themselves, as well as their work, were a yeast or leaven in society.

The Establishment had a peculiarly biased view of what it was to be a dissident. They saw the dissident as a shameless, wanton hedonist; as someone whose aims was wilfully and diametrically opposed to the Greater Good of Hive Mind. They called dissidence the Cult of the Individual and they saw Egotism

as some kind of pathological infectious cultural disease, or the root of all evil, something which must be eradicated at all costs; whilst the dissidents themselves realized and appreciated that egotism did cause major issues and that this was something that they would have to patiently work on. The individual might work on it over the course of a lifetime, whilst the culture worked on it from one generation to the next.

But in opposing the Hive Mentality and the regime behind it, it really wasn't that dissidents like Holly were in opposition to the greater good of society. The majority of her fellow dissidents held quite laudable spiritual views and lived loving and caring lives. For that matter, some were even of a Collectivist persuasion and yearned to live in communes with like-minded people. It was simply that they valued individuals as unique human beings with inalienable human rights of their own, and they also valued the worthy contribution that the individual made to humankind, both as an individual and also as part of a team. Without an individual being and without voluntary individual effort and without brave entrepreneurs and farsighted visionaries, there would simply be no coherent plan, be no real pulling together and be no Greater Good.

As with so many other things in life, it was surely about finding a natural balance and dynamic equilibrium; rather than having some lifeless, lopsided mechanical system indiscriminately imposed upon everyone.

If Holly were asked to sum all this up in a sentence, she might say that the dissidents were round blocks to society's square holes; and that whilst the average Hive-abiding citizen was straight and rigid and their minds were closed, her kind were largely flexible and loose and open minded. And above all, they were caring and loving people.

It didn't take Holly long to find her first fellow dissidents. There was a group of youths and one or two young girls sitting at a table in the sun outside a café; and seeing them sniggering, she could tell in an instant that they had been smoking weed and were wearing sunglasses to hide their dilated pupils. For heaven's sake, even a rookie Enforcer straight out of boot camp could have told her that. One of the youths had spotted her, too, which was rather disconcerting; but she surreptitiously shook her head, averted her

eyes and walked straight past, knowing that it would be sheer folly to be seen with this motley crew. Especially with CCTV cameras everywhere, chances were that the Investigators would already have the group under observation, in the sure and certain knowledge that sooner or later these smoked sprats would lead them to bigger fish.

7. Not a wise move

Kingsley eventually emerged from the shower after a long and luxurious soak. It really was a novelty and he was determined to make the most of it. This was one of the few times since he'd joined the Service that he didn't have to gallop around the flat pulling on his clothes as he went, make a mad dash for the car and burn rubber to get to work on time. Of course the solution would have been simple: to set the alarm clock a few minutes earlier and actually get out of bed when the alarm went off. He could see that now in the calm light of day; but at the time, for one reason or another, this didn't happen.

Without even realizing that he'd been backsliding, he'd simply fallen into bad habits, to the point that dashing around like a headless chicken had become a way of life for him. Maybe he was hooked on the adrenaline rush that he got from living on the edge, in frequent danger of stepping over the threshold and breaking the rules? Who knows? Looking back, he could see that he'd always been a bit of a rule bender.

As Kingsley was reminded daily, out on the beat, people do the craziest things which they often consider quite normal, until the day they get pulled in and find themselves banged up in a cell. At that point, finally seeing things in black and white and realizing that all the "ifs" and "buts" and shades of grey and psychedelic colours in the world, that they'd used to justify their actions, aren't going to offer them one iota of help, cold stark reality hit them like a heavily-laden freight train.

This was a profound culture shock as much as anything, and especially so for the dissidents. By and large, the criminals knew that they were doing wrong; whilst the dissidents fervently believed that they were doing right. The criminals could accept justice, seeing it as a potential and legitimate liability on their corporate balance sheet. Some years they'd make a fat profit and other years they'd make a loss: that was the nature of the business they were in. But when the dissidents were faced with the cold, hard letter of the Law, which they actually took to be *injustice*, seeing themselves as victims and martyrs of a supposedly

misguided and corrupt system, the cognitive dissonance – and the judiciary – hit them all the harder.

Once Kingsley was dressed and spruced up, he headed for the kitchen to make himself another coffee, finishing off one carton of milk. Opening another to pour on his cereal, however, and taking his first bite, he cringed and spat the cereal back into the bowl. The milk had begun to turn sour. And, bless her, Holly wouldn't be back from town until mid-afternoon.

Well, there was only one thing for it, Kingsley decided, going through to the hallway to retrieve his jacket. He'd have to throw caution to the wind, go out to find a local shop and buy some more.

Kingsley left the flat and, only vaguely knowing the neighbourhood, he chose a direction at random and set off to circle the block; and if that failed, not letting his Service training go to waste, then he'd widen his search to adjacent blocks. In a residential area such as this, there had to be small shops somewhere nearby, if they hadn't been forced out of the market by the big high street names.

Sure enough, Kingsley spotted a convenience store on the next block and he quickly crossed the road toward it. Catching himself marching along, swinging his right arm in time with his left leg – which was another thing that Holly had warned him about – he thrust his hands in his jacket pockets and deliberately slackened his pace.

At the door, he had to smartly step to one side as three youths piled out onto the street and still they rudely barged past him. Had he been in uniform, he'd have stood his ground and reprimanded the youths, but eager to maintain a low profile, he bit his tongue and quietly entered the shop.

Kingsley found the refrigerator soon enough and he picked up a couple of cartons of milk and headed for the counter. The sooner he was out of the shop, the better. He'd spotted a couple of CCTV cameras out of the corner of his eye and avoiding the involuntary urge to look up at the cameras, he kept his head low.

As he reached the counter, he spotted a third camera and his heart skipped a beat when he heard the whirr. The camera had swung round to face him and the lens was being turned to bring the image into focus. The shop assistant took one of the milk

cartons from him and swept it through the bar code reader twice, without so much as a flicker of a smile or even a polite, businesslike please and thank you. Presumably personalized service cost extra, Kingsley mused. He swiped his temporary credit card through the machine on the counter, made a special point of loudly thanking the woman – thinking, if nothing else it might tweak her conscience – took his milk and hastily made for the exit.

On his way out of the shop, he caught sight of something that nearly stopped him dead in his tracks, but he gritted his teeth and walked out onto the street. By the door there was a pile of free local newspapers – the type that were full of advertisements and advertorials – and there on the front page, beneath a sensational, inch high headline, there he was. Fortunately it was an old Service shot of him in uniform and fresh out of boot camp, but he hadn't changed much since then, other than putting on a bit of weight and looking considerably more grim faced.

Glancing back, Kingsley could see that the shop assistant was already on the phone. He knew then that he'd been rumbled and he cursed himself for his stupidity.

He was just coming to the end of the block when he caught sight of the patrol car turning the corner and, spotting a narrow alleyway, Kingsley thrust the cartons of milk into his jacket pockets and dived for cover down there. As he ran, he snatched the disrupter from his inside pocket, flipped off the safety catch and primed the weapon.

Moments later, he heard a shout from behind him. One of the Enforcers had spotted him and he was giving chase on foot. Without further warning the man fired and Kingsley could almost feel the charge as it flew past overhead, exploded against a wall and ricocheted in a bright shower of sparks.

Kingsley dived behind a metal refuse bin, took aim and fired off a burst of three charges, adjusting his aim as the Enforcer ducked this way and that. The first two missed but the third hit the Enforcer full in the face and, since the idiot hadn't dropped his protective visor, it felled him in a stroke and he was thrown backwards to land flat out on his back.

Kingsley got up and dashed toward the far end of the alleyway. If these guys had any sense, the Enforcer's partner

would by now have driven the patrol car round the block to cut off his escape and box him in.

He had just reached the end of the alley and was about to check when he heard an unmistakable sound to his left and he instantly froze. Someone had just primed a disrupter and – contrary to safety regulations – was holding it mere inches from his unprotected head.

"Drop the gun, Kingsley," the man ordered and he silently complied. He slowly and gingerly bent his knees and placed the weapon on the floor. Then he slowly raised himself up again and turned to face the man. It was his old partner.

"How you doing, Jenkins?" he addressed the Enforcer. "Long time no see."

"A damn sight better than you'll be when you're banged up, Kingsley. They don't take kindly to ex-Fuss inside," the man replied matter-of-factly. "Most likely the big boys'll drill you a new asshole in a larger, more accommodating gauge.

"Now, no sudden moves. You know the procedure. Step away from the gun. Now, lay out on the floor, face down, with your hands clasped behind your head."

Kingsley had no option but to comply and Jenkins flipped up his visor, reached in his pocket and brought out a cable tie to cuff him.

That's as far as the man got, however. In that instant something whistled through the air. Kingsley looked up sharply and saw Jenkins clutching his face. A second charge flew through the air and the man's legs gave way beneath him and he slumped to the ground.

Kingsley pushed himself to his feet and snatched up his gun, ready for anything, and when he turned in the direction from which the shot had been fired, he saw another familiar, lanky figure standing there. It was Special Investigator Morrison.

"I'm very disappointed in you, Kingsley," the man sighed as he approached, shaking his head from side to side. "Now get the fuck out of here. We'll put this gaff down to experience. But if I see your butt ugly face on the street again without permission, be warned that I'll take you out myself."

Kingsley required no second telling and he quickly headed back to the flat with his tail firmly stuffed between his legs and

still cursing his gross stupidity. It was the kind of mistake that a rookie would have made, and a dumb rookie at that.

8. Off the beaten track

Having pretty much exhausted the two high streets in this quarter of the city, Holly decided that it would be better to check out the side streets. Most of the old shops run by independent retailers had been shut long ago and the premises converted into flats, but there were still one or two still defiantly flying the confederate flag and hanging on.

Holly soon came across one, down a narrow lane. A simple, flaking painted sign read “Books” and an arrow pointed inside, so she pushed the old door open with a squeak of unoiled hinges and clambered up a steep flight of woodworm-infested steps. There were ledges on the walls of the staircase, piled high with books, and at the top, the whole room was filled with densely packed bookcases, with still more books loosely piled on the floor, utilizing every ounce of space.

As Holly entered the room, she saw an elderly lady sitting there at a tiny makeshift desk. She still had her outdoor coat on and an eccentric, multi-hewed knitted hat on her head that looked like an old tea cosy. In fact, it probably had been a tea cosy at one time.

“Good morning,” the lady smiled as Holly entered, looking up from her knitting. “Come on in, our love. There’s no obligation to buy anything: feel free to browse.”

Holly knew in an instant that the lady was a dissident, but she decided to bide her time. “Thank you,” she smiled back and nodded, moving further into the room to have a look at the dusty tomes.

Certainly, many of the secondhand books were old, but none of them predated the Hive and not surprisingly there wasn’t a whiff of dissidence in any of the titles.

She’d been told by Horace, a dissident historian, that in the early days there’d been mass burnings, leading to a drop in educational attainments, but more recently, of course, having learnt their lesson, many books had been written from scratch, or rewritten, by AI. Some, but not that many, were still written by the Chosen Few, who could be trusted to strictly toe the Hive line.

Concerning this, most of the population either knew, or cared, little.

And it went without saying that in the thrillers, especially, the Enforcers or Special Investigators always got their man or woman.

But still, Holly had a good look round the collection before finally turning back toward the door.

Seeing her about to leave, the old lady put down her knitting and looked up. “Not found anything that takes your fancy, our love?” she asked.

“Afraid not,” Holly sighed. Then, on the spur of the moment, she decided to throw caution to the wind. “I must say, I do like your tea-cosy. Did you knit it yourself?”

In that instant, a broad smile creased the old lady’s face from ear to ear, and her hazel eyes lit up. “Oh, it’s older than that, my love. My own dear mother knit it, more years ago than I care to remember. Knitting is an old tradition in our family, handed down from mother to daughter since time immemorial.”

Holly beamed. “Yes, I thought that might be the case.”

“Gladys Bagshaw. I’m pleased to meet you, my love,” the old lady replied, extending a soft, wrinkled hand.

Holly gently returned the handshake. “Holly Potter, and I’m very pleased to meet you, too, Gladys.”

The old lady nodded her head toward a kettle. “Fancy a cuppa? Then you can tell me your story, my love.”

“That’s kind of you, Gladys. Yes, I’d love one. I’ve been traipsing the high streets for hours hoping to make contact with another sentient soul and I’m quite parched.”

“Are you new around here, then?” Gladys enquired when she’d checked that there was enough water in the kettle and switched it on.

“Yes,” Holly nodded. “I’ve just moved here from a town in the north and of course I don’t know anyone here as yet. I was hoping to find supplies of decent food. I mean real food that I can cook from scratch ...”

“... Not processed muck. I know exactly what you mean, Holly,” Gladys interjected.

The lady tossed three spoonfuls of tea into the teapot. “One per cup and one for the pot,” she explained.

“Gosh, I didn’t even know that you could get real tea these days,” Holly remarked.

“That’s one of the few good things about living in the city,” Gladys told her as she poured in the boiling water and gave the pot a stir. “I’m afraid that I can’t go naming my sources, but over the years I’ve become rather well connected, my love, so just make me a list and I’ll see what I can get hold of for you. The suppliers will want the money up front, of course.”

“That’s really kind of you, Gladys. And you’ll want something for your own troubles. How long will that take?”

“Oh no, I couldn’t take your money, Holly. It’s a labour of love for friends, you see. Now what day is it? Wednesday?”

Holly nodded.

The old lady gave the pot a final stir and held a strainer over the cups while she poured the tea out. She handed Holly her tea. “Help yourself to milk and sugar and a biscuit.”

“Well, they deliver in time for collection on Wednesdays and Saturdays,” the old lady continued. “So if I place your order after I close up today, it will be ready for Saturday.”

“Wow, that really is good of you,” Holly enthused.

“Now, while our tea’s cooling, let me find a pen and you can have a look at their price list. Reel off the items you’d like and I’ll write them down.”

A thought occurred to Holly as she ticked off the last item on her list. “Isn’t this arrangement rather dangerous?” she pointed out.

Gladys tapped the side of her nose knowingly. In spite of her advancing years, the old lady was still as bright as a button. “None of this is without its inherent dangers, my love, but the system has been very carefully thought out, and I must say it’s really quite ingenious when you know how. I’ll let you into the secret when we’re done. Anyhow, let’s drink our tea before it goes cold, and do help yourself to the home baked biscuits.”

And, with that baby safely tucked up in bed, Holly thanked the old lady and went back to the high street to pick up a few essentials before returning to the flat.

The way the system worked was that your orders were split up and delivered to several local shops where they would be carefully packaged ready for collection. So you went into the

shop, asked if a certain numbered order you'd placed was ready, and you picked the items up as if they were simply a part of your regular shopping. That way, there would be no suspicious deliveries to a black market warehouse, the bookshop or your own apartment; and no paperwork need be circulated containing incriminating details such as your name and address.

And what's more, dear old Gladys Bagshaw knew how to get hold of some more interesting and spicy titles. There were two in particular that Holly thought might interest and benefit Rowan – a bumper book of classical jokes and an antique tome entitled *The Joy of Sex: The Timeless Guide to Lovemaking* by Alex Comfort and Susan Quilliam – and she'd gleefully placed an order. If anything would loosen a man up and return him to his heaven-sent senses, other than a liberal dose of good old-fashioned rib-tickling humour, it would be to break the taboo of sensuality. Humour and sex could touch you in deeply hidden places that lesser therapies could only dream of reaching.

There was one overarching drive behind all this, and that was her desperate need to be finally reunited with her beloved toddler Jonathan. And if she had to take her kit off to achieve this, then so be it; for until she loosened Rowan up, there was no possibility of introducing him to the dissidents and completing her part in the obscene bargain that she'd been forced to make with Special Investigations.

9. The raid

Holly sighed quietly to herself. Rowan had loosened up considerably over the last few weeks, though he was still barely awake to reality, distinctly rough around the edges, and really still unfit to be let loose in the wild, as it were. She'd actually grown to enjoy Rowan's company as she'd peered beneath his frosty exterior persona; he was useful to have around; and, indeed, she'd grown quite fond of the guy, in spite of some of his annoying ways and habits.

She knew better than to judge Rowan, because she didn't see him as the enemy but rather as a fallen friend in need of love, care and compassion. There were few amongst them who hadn't strayed from the path or fallen from grace at one time or another, because it was so hard for people to bear their load, keep the faith and stay awake to reality, with the world being in the sorry state that it was.

Holly didn't think that Rowan was anywhere near ready to be let loose. However, Special Investigations were growing impatient and increasingly more threatening, so there was really nothing that Holly could do but comply. Unable to persuade Special Investigations to bide their time, she reluctantly prevailed upon her new-found friends and made arrangements for her and Rowan to attend one of their Thursday evening gatherings.

Drawing in a deep breath, she and Rowan entered the library and had just begun to make their way upstairs toward the meeting room when she caught hold of Rowan's arm and brought him to a halt.

"Sorry, I won't be a moment, Rowan. I'm afraid that all the excitement has gone to my bladder and I really need to spend a penny."

Rowan smiled at her. "That's alright, I'll wait for you, love."

Well, Rowan was learning, but chivalry was the last thing she needed right now. She clasped hold of his hand and reached up to plant a sloppy kiss on his cheek. "No, no, sweetie. You go on up and save us a table while you can, and I'll be with you in a minute."

“Right oh,” he thankfully agreed and, blissfully unaware of what she was planning, he trotted upstairs to the meeting room.

As soon as Rowan was out of sight, Holly dashed to the ladies’ loo and found a vacant cubicle. She took off her own coat and tossed it to one side; then fished in her bag, pulled on the spare jacket and bunched her hair up under a hat. Stuffing the coat into the bag, she left the cubicle, pushed the bag down into the bottom of the refuse bin and left the powder room. She immediately headed for the side door out of the library and dashing off down the nearby alleyway, she made good her escape.

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Five minutes later, as arranged, Special Investigator Morrison gave the signal and a squad of Enforcement Officers left their vehicles and trotted across the car park to take up their positions. And, again at his signal, the Enforcers ran inside the library and took the stairs of the sweeping staircase two at a time. They paused at the entrance of the meeting room until they were all assembled, then burst in.

“Armed Enforcers!” a sergeant called out in warning. “Stay where you are! Armed Enforcers! Stay where you are! Hands behind your heads!”

The ladies in the meeting room put down their knitting and, looking more than a little puzzled, they turned their heads.

Just then, Special Investigator Morrison entered the room and the sergeant turned to him and shrugged his shoulders. “I think that there’s been a mistake, Sir,” he offered.

“We should say so,” one of the ladies protested, waving a knitting needle menacingly in their direction. It was Gladys Bagshaw, the bookshop keeper. “This is the Ladies’ Charity Knitting Circle, we’ll have you know, young man, not some dissident coven.”

Special Investigator Morrison waved his hands in the air. “Our apologies, Madam. It would appear that we received incorrect intelligence. If you don’t mind, we’ll have a quick look around, and then you may go about your business.”

Just then, Kingsley slowly emerged from an adjacent room with his bag slung over one arm and carrying several cups and saucers on a silver tray. “It’s okay, I think that I’m the one the Enforcers are looking for,” he announced, heading toward Gladys
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Bagshaw and handing her the tray.

"Ah, then our actions were not entirely ill-advised. You know the score, Kingsley. On the ground, if you please, sir," Special Investigator Morrison commanded, taking this in his stride, and Kingsley dropped his bag to the floor and obediently lay down with his hands clasped behind his head.

Two of the Enforcers came forward now, fastened a cable tie round his wrists and heaved the man back onto his feet, while Morrison retrieved his bag and rummaged around inside.

Morrison pulled out a book. "*The Joy of Sex*, sir? Somehow, we don't think that this lascivious work is on the list of approved titles. Enforcer Kingsley, we are arresting you for absence without leave; being in possession of prohibited literature, and on suspicion of dissident activities contrary to Our Greater Good. Do you understand the charges?"

The man nodded sheepishly.

"We must caution you, sir. You do not have to say anything. But it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be recorded and given in evidence."

Morrison peered into Kingsley's eyes and shook his head from side to side. "It's a sad day when one of our own goes native on us, Kingsley. A sad day. Be warned, Kingsley, we will press for the maximum permitted custodial sentence as a deterrent to others."

He abruptly turned away. "Okay sergeant, take this man back to the nick and we'll let him stew in the cells until morning."

Then a thought suddenly occurred to him. "And sergeant. Put out a bulletin for that bitch, Potter. We'll have her banged to rights, too. With any luck, in her case they'll throw away the ruddy key and she will not see her child again this side of eternity."

As they left the meeting room, he turned back momentarily. "Our sincere apologies once more, ladies. Please go about your business."

As he closed the door behind him, Special Investigator Morrison didn't see Gladys Bagshaw hop up and down on the spot and jubilantly punch the air. "That's spit in their eye!" she whooped for joy.

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Kingsley was the least of Special Investigator Morrison's problems that evening. As they approached the vans, the first thing he noticed was that all the tyres had been slashed. And when he dashed forward to check if the child was still safely in custody, he found the front of the van empty.

Going round the back of the vehicle, he heard a thumping coming from inside, and when he wrenched the back doors open, he found two of his men laid out on the floor, bound hand and foot and gagged. Curse the woman! After doubly screwing him that evening, she and her precious child were long gone.

Well, they still had Kingsley, and he'd still be sent down, so the bitch hadn't scuppered all their plans. Unless – perish the thought – she'd already put out the word that Kingsley was really working undercover. If that were the case, then Kingsley was in for a rough stretch inside.

For a moment or two, Morrison did consider pulling the plug on the operation, letting Kingsley off the hook and reinstating him; but he quickly dismissed that idea. The Chief wanted results and what she wanted, she inevitably got; Kingsley was already in too deep; and too much had been invested in the operation to back out now. And if it all went tits up? Well, as some pre-Hive pragmatist once observed: "That's one less thing to worry about."
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10. Banged to rights

Jail for Rowan Kingsley was bad from the outset and only much later did it become a strangely bitter and yet acquired taste; and just as the first sexual experience he'd had with Holly had precipitated all manner of subtle changes in him, so too did his first fearful, acrid and nauseating taste of incarceration open his eyes and involuntarily precipitate further and deeper change. It was at that point that he decided that he wasn't going to simply lay down and play the role of the downtrodden dissident; now that he actually felt downtrodden, and his self-esteem had inevitably taken a hammering, he was going to really live the part one hundred percent and make it worth his while.

One thing that hit Rowan Kingsley forcibly was that, just as Holly had suggested, now that he couldn't hang onto an image of himself as a heroic crime- and dissidence-fighting crusader, he really was left wondering: *Who the hell am I*? And, of course, the corollary of this was that for the first time in his life Kingsley had come to realize that things like the uniform, the badge and the gun had been nothing more than props shoring up a derelict mind.

Rowan's time in jail was not merely as humiliating, degrading and hopeless as he'd been led to believe in the many officially sanctioned anti-dissident films that they'd rammed down his throat since early childhood, it was far worse – for this time round, he wasn't some jolly popcorn-guzzling observer or armchair hero, but in the thick of it as a thoroughly impassioned pawn in the game. In those films, the protagonist was always shown as a deceitful or deeply flawed character, not as a hapless victim of a brutal system, and never once did that character escape from jail or have his antagonists banged to rights. Instead, he would inevitably see the light; be shown to repent his sins; be reprocessed and sometimes lobotomized; rejoin civilized society, and live happily every after as a decent, hard working, Hive-abiding model citizen.

Yes, just like the propagandist movies depicted, he and his fellow prisoners arrived at the jail shackled together hand and foot, and it was not simply as bad as he'd seen in the movies but

possibly worse *because* of the propaganda and *because* real life was now mimicking that fiction and actually magnifying it in effect and making it all the more grotesque.

There was a great joke that was forever doing the rounds in the jail and it was probably funny not because it had a humorous punchline but because it was so very true at a deep psychological level. Put anyone in that jail and soon enough they'd actually become a cruel, twisted, sadistic and heartless thug. And some of the prisoners were just as bad.

So yes, he had to strip off his clothes and stand in a cell whilst they hosed him down and bowled him over with a powerful jet of cold water; then tossed a great choking cloud of delousing powder all over him. Yes, they ground his personal possessions underfoot and burnt his old clothes in front of him. Yes, they tattooed a number on his arm and shaved every vestige of hair from his head, as they might have done to a novice in some grim, gothic monastery in the Dark Ages many centuries before the Hive came to power.

Yes, just like the movies, they issued him with a grimy and stained, ill-fitting, secondhand uniform and made him walk butt naked from the reception block to his cell, as hundreds of other inmates lined up against the wire to give him the hairy eyeball; heckled him; made the most lewd homosexual suggestions; and laid bets on which of his fellow freshers would be first to crack or which of them had the best looking arse. And yes, the catcalling went on for hour after hour through the night, and he spent most of that cold, lonely night wide awake with his thin pillow over his head to block out that dreadful sound.

And of course when he was released from his cell in the morning and he came face to face with these creeps, many of whom could have had him for breakfast or sucked him in and blown him out in bubbles, in spite of his own bulk, things became that much worse. The hazing went on and on remorselessly for a week, until – thank heavens – the latest batch of new prisoners arrived, and most of the attention was instead turned on them.

Most, but not all.

When the others became bored with the new inmates, they were again on the lookout for victims, and Rowan must have had "Kick me" tattooed on his forehead or backside or something.

And the Hive Wardens turned a blind eye to this violence and depravity. You see, the whole system was designed to break them down or – failing that – to inevitably grind them down, as a necessary prelude to reconditioning in the event of their release. This, they euphemistically called rehabilitation. Rowan was grimly determined that he wouldn't let these events get to his heart and that he would survive intact against even these depressing odds.

There was one inmate in particular that Rowan was keen to avoid, and that was Harrison. Rowan had been late arriving at the canteen one morning and most of the seats had already been taken. So, blissfully unaware of what fate had in store for him, once he'd been served with the obligatory lumpy porridge, he'd blithely crossed the canteen and taken a vacant seat at one of the tables.

"Did I say you could sit there, Diss?" he'd heard a man snarl at him. Diss was what the Crims called the dissidents, and it wasn't a term of endearment. There was no love lost between the two factions. He looked up sharply, initially shocked that he'd made the stupid, schoolboy mistake of choosing a table reserved for the Crims. But what shocked him even more was to see that hulk of a man sitting at the head of the table, waving his fork menacingly in his spade-like hand in Rowan's direction. Instantly recognizing Harrison, his heart lurched and his head was swamped by a sudden wave of adrenaline. Muttering his humble apologies, Rowan nervously backed away and searched around for another free seat, hoping to heaven that Harrison hadn't recognized him. Fortunately, he caught sight of one of the other dissidents. The man had seen Rowan standing there like a prune and, coming to his rescue, the man motioned to a spare seat at his table. Rowan couldn't get there and take his seat too soon.

"You want to steer well clear of fat boy," the scrawny, ginger-haired man warned him under his breath. "The other day, he stiffed Nielson. Now he's taken over as Top Dog on this block, and I can see that he's going to be *big* trouble."

"Elder Archer," the man introduced himself, offering his hand. "Elder sounds a bit formal, though, so my friends call me El."

Rowan shook his hand. "Rowan Kingsley," he returned.

“Pleased to meet you, El.”

“So, what brings you here, Rowan?” the man wanted to know.

Rowan nervously scanned the table.

El smiled. “It’s okay, we’re all friends her. You can speak freely if you keep your voice down.”

Rowan shrugged his hands apologetically. “I was an Enforcer,” he began, hastily adding: “and I’m not proud of it. I went native a while back, then absent without leave and, to cut a long story short, they caught me, tried me and here I am.”

“Yes, I heard something about that,” one of the others nodded. “It made the national headlines.”

El sucked in his breath and peered into his eyes. “Rowan, it’s a good thing that you are amongst friends of a forgiving nature here. If you value your life, then take my advice and keep that information under your hat. If the Hive Wardens find out, they’ll tell the Crims. And when fat boy finds out, he and his sidekicks will have your guts for garters.”

Rowan nodded and hung his head. “Thanks for the word of warning, El. It’s appreciated. Fortunately, my ex-boss took pity on me, pulled a few strings and had my record amended. As far as the authorities here are concerned, I’m just a regular dissident and the only thing the guards know is my number, D41313. But I do heed your warning, so thanks again.”

Having said that, Rowan was deeply worried. As his hair and eyebrows gradually grew back, it was surely only a matter of time before Harrison or one of the other Crims recognized him. There was only one thing lower in their book than a Diss, and that was an Enforcer who’d fallen from grace. Unless, of course, the Enforcer had been bent and in their pay. The Crims treated them as one of their own.

On his way out of the canteen, Rowan saw Harrison hovering in the doorway. Indeed, he was such a big guy that the others had to sidle by him to get past. None of them appeared brave enough to ask him to move, and none of the sidekicks who were with him possessed the basic social skills to politely suggest they move out of the way.

Just as he was passing, Rowan felt a spade like hand on his shoulder, and such was the grip, that he was stopped dead in his

tracks. It was Harrison and Rowan staggered as a wave of adrenaline suddenly flooded his system. Up close, the man looked more muscular and menacing then ever; and even his neck, with its bulging blood vessels, looked as sturdy as a tree trunk.

Harrison was giving him a peculiar look and finally he spoke. “I know you from somewhere,” the man said.

Rowan shook his head and forced a smile. “I’m sorry, I can’t place your face,” he replied.

“I never forget a face,” Harrison added, but the ape flattered himself, for it was patently obvious in this case that he had.

Fortunately, at this point one of the Hive Wardens came to the rescue, banging his truncheon on the top of a nearby table to attract their attention. “Alright, alright ladies. Don’t stand there blocking the exit. Shift your asses and get to your work details.” This momentarily distracted Harrison and Rowan took the scant opportunity it afforded to make good his escape.

Rowan met El a few times in those early weeks and they soon became fast friends. El introduced him to the other dissidents and during their exercise and rest periods, he spent much of his time in their company. He felt a lot safer with other dissidents around him, though seldom safe enough to fully relax. Even when he was in his cell on a night, figuratively speaking he slept with one eye open.

One evening as Rowan was returning to his cell ready for lock in, El passed by and surreptitiously pushed something into Rowan’s pocket. Once he was safely back in his cell, Rowan fished in his pocket and discovered that it was a small brown bottle. Unscrewing the cap he was pleasantly surprised to find that it wasn’t noxious medicine in the bottle but some kind of alcoholic spirit, which was a rare luxury. El later confided that they collected the potato peelings from the bins outside the kitchens, fermented the peelings and then put the brew through a makeshift distillery, the location of which El did not disclose, even to him. Savouring each fiery mouthful, within minutes Rowan was feeling more than suitably squiffy and could finally switch off, at least for a few brief hours.

Things seldom went this well, however.

A week later, when Rowan was working in the laundry, one of the supervisors came up to him and asked him to go get a fresh

batch of detergent. So, thinking nothing of the request, since it came from a member of the prison staff, Rowan left the laundry and headed for the adjacent stores.

"Hello," he called, seeing nobody at the counter, and he pinged the service bell. Just then he heard the door close behind him and he turned. He was shocked to see two prisoners standing there, and it was clear from the fact that their sleeves were rolled up and their arms folded, that they meant business.

Just then, the stores clerk arrived and he nervously took in the scene.

"Beat it, Pop," one of the prisoners requested, and he held the door open for the man as he hastily scurried away.

The two prisoners came forward now and grabbed Rowan by the arms, and a third stepped out of the shadows. It was Harrison, and Rowan knew then that the game was up.

"I told you that I never forget a face, Mister Enforcer. But perhaps I need to remind you of my own. Remember me? You're the guy who caught me in the balls with a disrupter. After the bank raid, when I crashed the getaway car into the wall, remember?"

Harrison came closer, until he was almost pressing his face up against Rowan's, and Rowan almost gagged at the stench of the man's fetid breath. Harrison was seething with rage and looked fit to bust a blood vessel. "Well, what I'm going to do is help you to remember, Fuss. In fact, you'll remember so intensely, that you will never again be able to forget."

Rowan tried to shrug his shoulders, but the man's two sidekicks had tight hold of him by the arms. "There's no personal animosity, Harrison. Like you, I was just doing my job. We're both in the same game, but happen to be on opposite sides of the fence, that's all."

That's as far as Rowan got. Without warning, the man lashed out, and then he hit Rowan again and again, using him as a punch bag, until finally Rowan lost consciousness and they let him slip to the stone floor.

When he was hospitalized for the first time with cracked ribs and internal bruising, that was bad enough. However, when he was hospitalized for a second time, having been forcibly sodomized by one of the ape's cronies – since fat boy wasn't

willing to soil his own wedding tackle – this resolve was sorely tested. And unlike the movies, in real life there was no fairy Godmother watching over him to intervene and kiss him better and invoke poetic justice. As someone once quipped:

In real life crime,
some poems rhyme.
And some don't.

Still, he was in better shape than the pervert in the next bed. One of the boys had rammed a length of glass rod up his willy and then hit it with a hammer. However twisted it might at times appear, there really *was* honour to be found amongst thieves.

Rowan's one consolation whilst recovering in hospital was that Elder Archer had been assigned to help mop the floors and whenever he got the chance, the man popped into the ward to have a word with Rowan and did his best to cheer him up. The guy even thoughtfully brought fresh supplies of that wicked potato liquor.

El was a dreamer – possibly induced by the illicit homegrown weed that he regularly ate (since smoking was so fraught with danger) – and he kept saying that one day, when he got out of jail, he'd leave the city; beg, borrow or steal a boat and sail off to Arcadia where the Fuss couldn't touch him. A few of the other dissidents used to talk about Arcadia, but Rowan had yet to meet anyone who had ever been there and returned, or even knew of anyone else who had been there or returned, and he did think that it was most likely just some old romantic folk legend or myth to hang onto; just like their irrational, but comforting, belief in an afterlife in heaven.

But Rowan had bigger worries on his mind now. Harrison was going to out Rowan to the other inmates, too, so that they would make his life even more of a living nightmare; but one of his sidekicks suggested instead that Harrison use the threat of outing to get Rowan to run errands for them. And that threat was more frightening than the consequences Rowan would have to suffer if the Hive Wardens found out that he was smuggling.

So again Rowan's resolve was sorely tested. There was one way out, you see, other than to sit out one's stretch or – by one means or another – escape in a pine box. All you had to do was crack up and beg to see the Governor; grovel at his feet and admit

to being a dissident; heartily repent your sins, and volunteer for elective brain surgery. Believe me, he'd considered stringing himself up or opting for surgery on many an occasion as he lay in bed in his cell brooding on a night; but fortunately his resolve to survive proved stronger than his desire to escape.

Rowan had Holly to thank for that, and losing her had dealt him a bitter blow. In the short time he'd spent with Holly, she'd taught him such a lot. Some of it had been explicit and yet this was perhaps just the tip of the proverbial iceberg, for much, much more that he'd learnt had been implicit and picked up through indirect means, such as through the actual experience of humour and the actual experience of the implicit sensuality that lay beyond the explicit act of sex.

And yet, of course, he also felt used and abused by Holly, having found out that as soon as she'd got what she really wanted – the return of her child – her selfish interest satisfied and in spite of her flowery words about the wonders of dissidence, she was off like a shot without so much as a backward glance. So yes, the Cult of the Individual did have a lot to answer for, and he'd been left angry and confused and especially divided about such issues.

But cast those thoughts aside and instead give the dissidents their due, at least for the sake of argument. He could see now why they should defiantly hang on to their old ways and to simple things like personal names. The Hive Wardens could sternly refer to him as Prisoner D41313, and they could spit in his face as they said it, but he could still defiantly hang on to being Rowan Kingsley, a unique human being merely temporarily divested of his human rights, knowing that these hard and brutal times would eventually pass. This was a part of him that they couldn't touch, and it was of vital importance to him that he held onto his belief that for all the Hive Wardens put him through, they couldn't touch him deep down inside. Yes, for the first time in his life, he actually had something to believe in that was truly worth believing in; and it all started with himself and would hopefully fan out to encompass others as he himself progressed.

Fortunately, there were some good people inside with him, who kept their heads down to avoid trouble, and pretty much kept themselves to themselves. There were some minor Crims amongst them, but by and large they were dissidents. They

weren't pushovers though. Whilst they may have had pacifist tendencies when they had first entered the jail, they soon learned to toughen up in this neanderthal environment where one dog chewed the balls of the next dog.

One of the few redeeming graces about being inside with these people, other than the simple fact that they made good company and taught him so much, was that at least amongst themselves they could freely be themselves. They didn't have the added pressure of having to watch every word they spoke or gesture they made. In the outside world, the dissidents had to hide their true nature not only from the authorities, but all the more so from the vast majority of their fellow citizens. Indeed, in the outside world far more dissidents were informed on by their own peers, even by their own families, than were ever caught by Enforcement or Investigations, such was the sick power and efficacy of the social conditioning to which they were all constantly subjected.

Another of the redeeming graces of being inside was that there was an almost limitless time and opportunity to think. They spent their days working long and hard in the kitchens or the laundry or sowing hessian mail bags, but the work was so menial and mentally undemanding that you could carry it out on autopilot whilst your mind was elsewhere. Hah! Wouldn't it be good if you could do that in everyday life? Simply leave the donkey to its devices and slope off on vacation to bask in the sun by the sea?

And of course one of the absolute *banes* of being inside was there there was almost limitless time and opportunity to think. That was another piece of gallows humour that was forever doing the rounds in the jail.

This humour, too, was a valuable commodity in the jail. Some wags actually used it as a currency, like they did illicit tobacco. "If I didn't laugh, I'd cry" was one of the more popular sentiments expressed by his fellow dissidents from time to time. This indomitable humour, and the freedom they had to express it, was something else that the Hive Wardens couldn't steal away from them, no matter how often or how hard they tried. These dissidents really did know how to laugh in the face of danger and oppression.

When Rowan had first entered the jail, he'd begin to mark the days by making scratches in the whitewash on his cell wall, but if anything he found this act quite depressing, and in any case every so often the Hive Wardens would make them change cells. Since they had no access to news outside the jail, other than whatever juicy morsels the new inmates brought with them, he soon lost all track of the date.

And then one day, quite out of the blue, when he'd emerged from his cell, one of the Hive Wardens, a haggard-looking bastard by the name of Smith, came up to him and addressed him.

"Prisoner D41313, come with me. The Chief Warden wants to see you," the man announced, matter-of-factly.

Rowan felt a surge of adrenaline pumping through his system and he tensed up. "Am I in trouble?" he wanted to know.

The Hive Warden made no reply. Instead, the man took him by the arm and marched him off down the corridor. It was a long walk from the cell block, though of course not as long as that last lonely walk for the condemned to their place of execution. They crossed the exercise yard; then went back inside and weaved their way through the labyrinthine passages, not speaking a word in all this time, until they finally reached administration and came to a stop outside the Chief Warden's office.

The Hive Warden looked Rowan up and down and fastened the top button on Rowan's overalls. Then, having straightened his own tie, he knocked loudly on the door and waited.

"Enter," a voice called from inside and the guard opened the door and went in.

"Reporting with Prisoner D41313 as requested, Sir," the Hive Warden announced, clicking his heels together and saluting.

"Very well, Smith. Show the prisoner in, then wait outside."

"Yes Sir." The guard turned smartly on his heels, grabbed hold of Rowan who was hovering in the doorway and dragged him inside to stand in front of the Chief Warden's desk.

The Chief Warden had a shiny bald head, a broken nose and cauliflower ears. He must have been quite a bruiser in his day, and even now in middle age he still appeared quite intimidating. The man stared directly and intensely at Rowan as he spoke, making him feel quite naked and uncomfortable. "The reason you've been brought here, Prisoner D41313, is that you are due

for parole, at our discretion. What that means is that if we are satisfied that you no longer pose a threat to others, and if you have genuinely turned over a new leaf, then you may be offered early release, on condition that you continue to live as an honest, Hive-abiding citizen. Should you lapse into your former criminal ways, however, you will be returned here to complete your sentence in addition to any fresh sentence you may be facing. Such parole is not a right, it is a privilege and it is entirely at our discretion. Do you understand?"

Rowan nodded.

"Speak up, man."

"Yes Sir, I understand."

"That's better."

The Chief Warden replaced his reading glasses, opened a brown manilla file that lay open on the desk before him and studied the contents. "Ah yes," he nodded. "You're the Enforcer who fell in with the dissidents, eh Kingsley? A major scandal that made the headlines."

That was the first time one of the wardens had called him by anything other than his number or by epithets like "Shit For Brains" since he'd first been locked up.

"Dreadful state of affairs. So Kingsley, have you learnt your lesson?"

Rowan's heart was racing and he solemnly nodded his head. "Yes, Sir."

The Chief Warden removed his spectacles and sat there peering at Rowan and thoughtfully sucking on one of the plastic legs of the glasses.

"I must say, you don't sound very convincing, Kingsley."

Of course, the man wanted to hear him say the right words.

"Oh, I've thoroughly learnt my lesson, Sir. I admit to my dissidence and repent the error of my ways."

Even as he spoke those words, he realized that he'd been tricked into using the personal pronoun, "I", and his face flushed with embarrassment. That was one of the oldest tricks in the book, though the worst of all was to be faced with the interrogation technique of Thirty Seconds. The interrogator would say something and you had to respond quickly, without once repeating yourself or using the personal pronoun. Very few

dissidents could last the full thirty seconds, and a refusal to comply was taken as equal proof of dissidence.

"Sorry about that, Sir. Having spent so much time inside in the company of dissidents, it's hard for us not to fall into bad habits. But please be assured that we earnestly desire to put the past behind us and start a new life on the straight and narrow."

The Chief Warden raised his eyebrows. "Well, after your release you'll go through an intensive twelve month course to recondition you, Kingsley, so we can excuse the odd lapse. Of course you do realize that regulations forbid you from rejoining the Service ..."

Rowan sighed and waved his arms in appeal. "But the Service is our life, Sir."

"With your background, Kingsley, we are sure that you could find alternative employment working with recovering dissidents. There's a lot of call for that kind of work, or so we are told."

"But it wouldn't be the same, Sir. We wish to play a more proactive role. Nothing would give us greater pleasure than to rise through the ranks and become an Investigator."

The Chief Warden sucked in his breath. "Well, there is one way in which you might be allowed to rejoin the Service, Kingsley; though it will require sacrifice on your part."

Rowan looked askance. "Which is, Sir?"

"If you were to volunteer for elective surgery."

Rowan should have seen that sales pitch coming and he could feel the colour drain from his face.

"Yes, this is not something to enter into lightly, so when you've recovered from the shock, give it further thought. It might ease your mind, perhaps, if we were to tell you that in such a case, your entire criminal record would be erased and you'd be able to begin to rebuild your life again with a clean slate. In such cases, employers are legally obliged to not discriminate against you on such grounds."

Rowan nodded thoughtfully, though secretly he was wondering if the Chief Warden would be paid a commission on the sale. "That option is quite tempting, Sir."

The Chief Warden nodded. "Yes, we hoped it might, Kingsley. Well, give the matter some thought, and when you see the Counsellor at your reconditioning sessions, you might perhaps

broach the subject?"

Rowan looked up sharply. "When we see the Counsellor, Sir? Does that mean that you're granting our parole?"

Again the Chief Warden smiled and, taking up a rubber stamp, he marked the file "Approved" in bright green ink.

Rowan was over the moon and he felt like doing a little celebratory jig on the floor. He reached over the desk and shook the Chief Warden's hand. "Oh thank you so much, Sir. You don't know how much this means to us."

"Good, good," the Chief Warden smiled and he called the guard back into the room. "Kingsley here is to be released on parole. Please take him along to stores and issue him with a fresh set of civilian clothes and an allowance to tide him over for the next two weeks."

"Very good, Sir," the Hive Warden saluted.

"And Kingsley. We do not want to see you here again, so keep your nose clean. All hail the Hive Mind."

"Don't worry Sir, we'll be as good as gold. All hail," grinned Rowan, skipping out of the room after the Hive Warden.

"Oh, we wouldn't be so cock-a-hoop, if we were you, D41313," the guard told him gruffly when they were out of earshot of the office. "You might have fooled the Chief Warden, but you don't fool us for one minute. No matter what the Chief Warden and the other do-gooders and mollycoddlers say about turning over a new leaf and starting again with a clean slate – as an ex-Enforcer turned native, you are the lowest of the low in our eyes and you are a marked man. Scum, that's what you are – pure Scum. So it is our earnest hope that you'll find life outside every bit as daunting as it is in here, and that before long, you'll be begging to be lobotomized."

Rowan was deeply shocked by what the man had to say, and by the dispassionate and clinical, yet frightfully direct, nature of his delivery. Again, he was stunned by the man's intense gaze and involuntarily averted his eyes.

"Nothing personal, D41313, but if you want our opinion, the only certain cure for the disease of Dissidence which afflicts the likes of you and is a bane in the lives of decent, Hive-abiding citizens, is a long drop on the end of a rope – be that enforced by the Powers That Be or self-inflicted. It doesn't matter to us which

way, just so long as it's done.

"Rest assured, D41313, that we have a lot of loyal friends out there. And mark my words, by hook or by crook we'll get you sooner or later. Maybe tomorrow; maybe next month; or maybe in five years time. Who knows? We could strike anywhere and at any time, D41313; most likely when your guard's down and you're least expecting it to happen. Maybe when you're sitting on the John wanking yourself. But happen it undoubtedly will. You can depend on that."

The Hive Warden tapped him lightly on the arm with his truncheon. "Oh, by the way, did I tell you about your old friend Harrison?"

"What about him?" Rowan snapped.

"His parole's coming up and the lads have put in a good word for him. Chances are, this time next week, he'll be released. There, we thought you'd be thrilled to hear the good news. We're sure he'd like to meet up with you again and renew your acquaintance. Oh, what fun: it'll be just like old times."

Again the colour drained from Rowan's face, he lost the elated spring in his step and his whole body felt suddenly weak and heavy.

"Dead man walking," called out another Hive Warden as he passed, and the man spat in his face. Bad news travels fast, as they say, and word had soon got around.

It would seem that fat boy Harrison had decided to out him after all, so Rowan's release could not have been more timely; and he did wonder whether he might revise his theory about fairy Godmothers.

11. The meaning of love

Rowan had just been let out through the heavy metal main gates and was looking around for the nearest bus stop when he heard a car creeping up behind him and he turned. The car came to a halt for a moment and the door swung open.

"Get in," a man called, and he instantly recognized the voice. It was Special Investigator Morrison.

He hastily clambered in the black car and closed the door, and even before he'd managed to fasten his safety belt, craning his long neck this way and that to check that they were unobserved, Morrison had pulled away.

Anger welled up inside Rowan at this point. "Have you any idea what you've put us through?" he demanded to know.

"Yes," the man nodded, with not the least bit of concern in his voice. "But it's over now and you know that it's all in a Good Cause."

"The hell it is," Rowan retorted. "I've – rather, we've – just been given the third degree by one of the Hive Wardens and there's a contract out on our life." And he went on to tell Morrison the grim details.

"Leave that to us," the man sought to assure him, again without a mere ripple of concern or consolation. "We have friends in high places, too, and we can keep you under close surveillance. And in any case, this will only add further credence to your story."

"You mean you still want to go ahead with the plan?" he queried, though he already knew the answer to that.

"Of course we do, Kingsley. We have invested too many resources in the undercover mission to back out now."

Rowan was livid. "*You've* invested resources, Mister Special Investigator? Don't make me laugh. Let me remind you that *I'm* the one who's been given the shitty end of the stick here, not you."

Special Investigator Morrison turned and peered into his eyes for a moment before redirecting his attention to the traffic. "You haven't really gone native on us, have you, Kingsley? That's one

worry we had when initially planning the mission."

Rowan bit his lip. If that was Thirty Seconds, then he'd really blown in.

He shook his head briskly. "No, no. It's just that we've been banged up with the blessèd dissidents for so long, some of their mannerisms have rubbed off, that's all."

"Well, you'll be going through twelve months' reconditioning anyhow, Kingsley, so that should sort out any wrinkles."

Rowan sighed. "Have you any idea of the extent to which this messes with a person's mind, living a double life, Mister Special Investigator? For the sake of the Greater Good, it would be better if we skipped the reconditioning. While we've been inside, we've found out a lot about how the dissidents work and what makes them tick, and if we're to successfully infiltrate their movement, we have to be utterly convincing; and I use the word 'utter' advisedly. Now, we've got this off to a tee, and reconditioning is only going to throw another spanner in the works."

The Special Investigator shrugged. "Okay, Kingsley: this is virgin territory for us and you're the expert here. We'll take your word for it that you know how best to handle this, and we'll abide by your decision."

Rowan sank down in his seat and tried to relax. "Thank you," he replied at length. "Anyhow, where are we going?"

Morrison waited for the traffic lights to turn green before replying. "We thought it best to take you back to the apartment you shared with the woman – what's her name? – Potter."

"I see."

"And don't worry," the Special Investigator went on. "We hasten to add that there's no official record linking you to the apartment and that nobody else knows the address."

"Thanks again, Sir. That's good to know."

Then he asked: "Did you ever locate Potter, Sir?"

The Special Investigator turned down a road to the left, squeezing past a badly parked car, then shook his head. "No, blast it. The woman's long gone and we haven't even heard a sniff of intelligence about her whereabouts. She appears to have vanished off the map. We had suggested that the woman be tagged with a chip implant so that we could track her movements, but by the

time the Powers That Be had gone through their bureaucratic machinations and finally approved the procedure – since at that point she was simply assisting us with our inquiries and hadn't actually been charged with any criminal offence – the woman had already fled."

Well, that was bad news for the Hive, but no doubt good news for Holly and her child, Jonathan. He'd been angry at her for leaving him so abruptly, of course, but his feelings toward her had again mellowed over time. Holly had been a great help to him and, for that matter, to the Service; and it would be wrong to wish harm to befall her because of some petty personal animosity. Certainly, the last thing Rowan would wish was that she should have to suffer the indignities and horrors of incarceration like he had. That was something that they should reserve for the worst dregs of society, not for the unfortunate.

Special Investigator Morrison pulled up near the apartment block and let Rowan out, then drove off immediately, telling Rowan that he'd be in touch.

At the jail, they'd taken all Rowan's personal possessions, including his wristwatch and keys. The watch had been crushed underfoot and the keys had not been returned, but fortunately he and Holly had left a spare set of keys with the janitor who had a small apartment in the basement, so it was a simple enough matter to retrieve the spare keys from him, promising to return the keys once he'd had a fresh set cut.

The first thing that Rowan noticed when he entered the apartment was how cold it was and how musty it smelt. Being unoccupied for such a long period of time, the credit had long since run out on the electricity meter and consequently the central heating had been cut off.

So the first thing to do was take a walk to the nearest convenience store, top up the credit on the meter card and buy in a few essentials like milk and bread. Again, his personal credit card had been taken from him at the jail and had not been returned, which would take some sorting out at the bank, but at least they'd issued him with an allowance on a temporary card to tide him over. The temporary card didn't carry quite the same stigma as food coupons for the poor, of course; but, nevertheless, using it would be about as telling as showing the shop assistant

the navy blue number tattooed on his arm. Oh well, he'd have to grin and bear it and simply count his lucky stars that he'd actually survived the accursed regime with his wits and his asshole more or less still intact.

The second thing that Rowan noticed when he returned from the shop and went to swipe the top up card through the electricity meter was that someone had been through the apartment in their absence. They appeared to have done a thorough job, though fortunately they hadn't made a mess. Presumably Morrison had paid a call, looking for clues, after Holly absconded.

What really hit Rowan, however, as he sat down on the settee to drink the first real coffee he'd tasted in months, albeit instant coffee granules, was how quiet and empty it felt in the apartment without Holly there. Whilst he'd been inside, Rowan had cherished the evenings when he could spent private time on his own in his cell, though of course when it was time for the lock in and lights out, he had the long, lonely nights to face. He'd have given anything to have been tucked up in bed with Holly instead.

The well-thumbed copy of *The Bumper Book of Classic Jokes* that Holly had bought him was still on the occasional table where he'd left it all those months ago. The book had caused him great mirth when he'd begun to read it, though now the mere sight of it just added to his sadness. It was then that Rowan noticed something white sticking out from the pages and he picked up the book and opened it to find out. It was a small white envelope and, discarding the book, leaving it open and face down so that he didn't lose his place, he opened the unsealed envelope to find a short note inside.

He read the note and then raised it to his lips and kissed it, and even after all these months he could still detect Holly's scent on the paper. If she went out before he'd got out of bed, she'd always leave him a note and spray her scent on the paper to remind him of her. She'd said that this was "romantic", and it was these little, kind gestures that he'd perhaps miss as much as anything, other than Holly herself.

"*My dearest Rowan*," the note read. "*Luckily for you, by the time you read this letter you'll have served your time inside and can once again begin to rebuild your life; and alas, I'll be long gone. I'm afraid that for obvious reasons I can leave no*

forwarding address.

"*Please forgive me for abandoning you in your hour of need, sweetheart, but Jonathan's needs were greater than yours. And besides that, in all conscience I could not betray my own kind. So I really had no option but to abscond.*

"*I hope you can understand this and find it in your heart to forgive me.*"

And the note was signed "*With love and best wishes, Holly xxx.*

She'd even added a thoughtful postscript:

"*P.S. Those are kisses and the spots on the paper are my tears.*

"*P.P.S. I know how much we enjoyed reading jokes to one-another to while away the evenings, so I'll leave you the bumper book as a keepsake. I think you'll find its contents quite enlightening.*"

Now those awful feelings of abandonment and desolation had once again returned and Rowan was suddenly overcome with emotion. His hand shaking, he placed the letter down on the occasional table by the settee, clutched his head in his hands and wept and wept, until at length he'd drained the pond and he could cry no more.

Rowan was feeling quite hungry by this time, but he couldn't face having to cook a meal and so he quickly made himself a slice of jam and bread, washed it down with the remnants of his coffee and took himself to bed, hoping that he might be in slightly better spirits in the morning when he woke.

When morning came, however, and Rowan suddenly remembered that he was still alone, with only the pillow to clutch for comfort and to play pretend, he heaved a deep sigh and once again he felt utterly dejected and despondent. It was at this point that Rowan realized that he really didn't give a damn about his mission and that life in general felt so empty and devoid of meaning and purpose without Holly around. He truly understood now what it was to have a sweetheart, and he wondered if this was what Holly had meant when she spoke of love? What she hadn't told him was that as well as bringing wondrous joy, it could also be a source of terrible sorrow.

And yet, for all that, perhaps Holly had been right when

she’d once said to him that “it is better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all”?

12. The meet

Later that week, Rowan received an unexpected call on his new phone. His old phone had been taken from him at the jail, of course, but the phone company had arranged for him to retain his old number.

There were only a handful of people who knew that number, all of whom were in the Service, and he fully expected that it would be Special Investigator Morrison, but he was quite surprised when he answered the phone to find that it was Barnes, one of his and Jenkins' old buddies.

"Hello there, Kingsley," the man lilted. "Listen, your old partner Jenkins found out that you'd been released and we thought that perhaps we might meet up some time, just to let you know how pleased we are that you've served your time and to show that there are no hard feelings. What do you say, good buddy?"

Well that was unexpected and very welcome news.

"Hey, it's good to hear from you, Barnes, and please pass on our best wishes to Jenkins. Long time no see, indeed. Hell yes, it would be great for us to meet up. What did you have in mind?"

"Oh, we're so glad. How's about we all meet up at your place after we clock off on the afternoon shift? Maybe we could call round at six o'clock, have a bit of a chat, then head off into the city for a meal somewhere?"

Rowan suddenly had a thought and it was a second or two before he answered. "Oh, you know we'd love to have you round, but to be honest the place is a pigsty – you know what unattached guys are like. Tell you what, let's all meet up at the Clock Café near Hinderwell Square, and later we can move on from there. We know a great restaurant not far from there."

Barnes seemed a little hesitant at the other end. "Oh, alright then. The Clock Café it is. We'll be there at six on the dot."

"Thanks, Barnes. It's good of you to think of us. We look forward to seeing you both then. Take care, buddy."

"Same to you, Kingsley," the man signed off, and the call disconnected.

At five o'clock that afternoon, Rowan had a quick shower to freshen up and changed into his best jacket and trousers. Then he poked around under the bed for something he'd taped to the underside of the brown plastic frame. It was his Service issue disrupter which Morrison had allowed him to keep whilst working undercover. He checked the charge and was surprised to find that it was still at eighty percent, but just to be on the safe side, he went into the lounge and plugged it into the universal charger. If he set the charge rate at maximum, the thing would be fully topped up by the time he had to leave.

Rowan removed the two fat volumes from the bookcase, flipped the catch and pulled the bookcase open. Going into one of the cupboards, he found the bottle of wine there where they'd left it and still half full. Abandoning protocol, he pulled the cork and took a couple of large swigs from the neck of the bottle before replacing the cork and closing up the bookcase. This was the first time he'd ventured far since his release and his period of incarceration had left him feeling quite edgy, verging on paranoid, in public; so he could do with a little bottled courage to buck him up.

Checking his new watch, Rowan found that due to his anxiety to be ready on time, he still had a good twenty minutes to kill. He did think of turning on the television and idly flipping through the channels, but in view of Holly's warnings he decided instead that he might as well read, so he picked up the joke book to take up where he'd left off and read a few pages before setting off into the city. If he arrived five minutes late, then he wouldn't have to face the anxiety of sitting alone in a public place like a lemon waiting for the others to arrive.

When he picked the book up and removed the letter marking his place, he flipped back a couple of pages to remind himself what he'd been reading, but Holly must have just slipped the letter in the book at random, because for the life of him he couldn't remember reading that far into the book.

Certainly he hadn't read the page that had been marked. It was full of short jokes about knitting that he really didn't get, let alone find funny, like "*What do you get if you cross a sheep with a kangaroo?*" He had to look up the answer in the back of the book, and when he read "*A woolly jumper*", he was still none the

wiser, and of course dear Holly wasn't around to advise him or simply set him off with her own infectious laughter.

And there was another.

A police officer on a motorbike saw a car being driven erratically and he was shocked to see that the blond woman at the wheel was busily knitting. Drawing alongside, he called out "Pull over!"

"No, it's a scarf," she nonchalantly replied.

It occurred to Rowan then that some jokes were actually funny in a perverse kind of way simply because they were so corny.

In the end, still feeling anxious about meeting up with the guys from work and unable to find the last joke he remembered reading, he decided to leave the book and have a look later, and instead he went back to the secret cupboard to have a third swig from the bottle. His most pressing need was to calm himself down and relax, so he spent a few minutes sitting cross-legged on the settee practising a slow, deep breathing exercise that Holly had once recommended, and that seemed to do the trick.

Rowan glanced at his watch again and decided that it was time to lock up and head into the city. If it looked like he was going to be early, he'd simply slacken his pace; and it he was going to be late, he'd increase his stride.

When he arrived at the Clock Café, almost in time with the striking of the bell in the tower, he found Barnes already there waiting for him at a table outside.

"Good to see you, Barnes," he smiled, reaching forward to shake the man's hand. "Jenkins gone to point Percy at porcelain?"

Barnes rose to his feet. "Likewise, Kingsley. Sorry, no, unfortunately something came up and Jenkins couldn't make it. He sends his profuse apologies."

Just then, Rowan heard a distinct humming sound behind him and he recognized it in an instant as a disrupter being primed, and he also caught sight of Barnes reaching inside his jacket. He dived at Barnes, bowling him over. The man had been reaching for his own gun and it spun through the air and clattered to the ground several feet away.

A moment later, a blast from a disrupter hit the flag stones just inches from where Rowan lay, erupting in a shower of sparks.

By now, he had his hand on his own gun and he turned and released the safety catch as he did so, and leapt to his feet. Seconds later, he hit his assailant full in the chest and the man fell forward on the ground, writhing in agony.

Barnes had him by the foot now and with a deft pull, he yanked Rowan off his feet and he fell backwards onto the hard flag stones, banging the back of his head and momentarily stunning him. Barnes took that brief opportunity to dash over to retrieve his gun, but with his vision still almost obscured by shooting stars, Rowan fired again, hitting Barnes in the back of the shoulder. Since the man was still scrabbling for his gun, Rowan let off two further shots, hitting Barnes squarely in the back and on the back of the head, then he turned and fired another shot into the other assailant, full in his face.

There was a third man there, too, and Rowan instantly recognized him as Harrison's sodomite sidekick – which came as an additional and almighty shock – but the wretch had soon turned tail and was well out of range by now.

"Barnes, you fucking idiot!" he yelled, turning back to face the man. "I'm working undercover!" But it was doubtful that Barnes could still hear him. It looked like both men were out for the count.

Snatching up the two stray disrupters, he shoved them in his pocket and ran away from the Clock Café. With CCTV all over the high streets, his only hope was to lose any pursuit in the warren of side streets and alleyways.

If they'd finally caught up with him, just as the Hive Warden had promised, then there was no way that Rowan could go back to the apartment now. These people weren't fools and being in the Service it would be a trivial task for them to locate his phone, and hence the flat, using GPS. Just to be on the safe side, he made a point of switching his phone off.

A piece of the jigsaw had just clicked into place. Rowan had finally got the jokes that Holly had left him, or rather a hint of what she really meant. The jokes on that page were all about knitting, and he remembered the old lady at the knitting circle now. Holly had never revealed to him where the book shop was where she'd got hold of the bumper book and *The Joy of Sex*, but she had of course told him about the old lady who ran the place;

about the knitted woollen tea cosy that she wore for a hat; and about her sitting there at her desk knitting. And Rowan would bet his last credit that this was the same lady whom he'd met at the supposed knitting circle at the library.

But that would have to wait. Right now he had to get away and hide up, probably sleeping rough in one of the alleys further across town. Thankfully, with Barnes working freelance on this contract, Rowan wouldn't have to face a whole swarm of Enforcers descending on the city to hunt him down.

Rowan had thought ahead and had a warm padded jacket on top of his suit, and he did find a large cardboard box to sleep in that night; but come morning, he was chilled to the bone, as stiff as a board, thoroughly damp from the early morning dew and, what's worse, he felt quite wretched and unkempt. It would be just his luck to be picked up on a charge of vagrancy by some passing patrol with nothing better to do with their time.

The first thing Rowan did was walk off the stiffness and then he found a quiet café off the beaten track. Not knowing where he'd get his next meal, he ate as much breakfast as he could stuff inside him. Rather than use his new personal credit card, he used the credit that remained on the temporary card he'd been issued, since that was anonymous and would be virtually impossible to trace.

Breakfast out of the way, he found himself an internet café and booked half an hour on one of their stock computers. Again, this was far safer than using his own phone. What he was hunting for were the addresses of any secondhand book shops within easy reach of the apartment. There were quite a few, and so he paid for a printout and, taking the list, he set out to methodically check each one. Holly hated the city's numerical grid layout, but if ever it proved useful, it did that day. It saved a whole heap of aimlessly wandering to and fro.

It took him a good hour and a half, but finally Rowan managed to track down the right bookshop. It was fifth on his list of seven and it was indeed the shop nearest the apartment. As he clambered up the steep bare wooden steps and turned the corner, he recognized the old lady instantly. She was wearing a brightly coloured woollen hat on her head and there was no mistaking her alert, hazel eyes; but if she recognized him, she showed no sign.

“Hello there, young man,” the old lady smiled. “Please feel free to browse. There’s no obligation.”

Rowan looked around to make sure he couldn’t be overheard, then decided to dive in the deep end. “Actually, Ma’am, I’m not here to buy a book today, I’m looking for a friend of mine. I believe she’s one of your customers: her name is Holly Potter and she’s of a petite build, with long black hair and green eyes. She bought *The Bumper Book of Classic Jokes* and *The Joy of Sex*.”

“My word, thanks be to the Hive, we don’t stock such lurid titles, young man,” the lady replied. “And we’re sorry, but we don’t know anyone of that name, nor anyone matching that description. Tell us, young man: do you work in Enforcement?”

The old lady was so alert and on the ball, Rowan had to smile. “I used to be,” he told her and he removed his jacket, pushed up his shirt sleeve and showed her the telltale blue prison tattoo on his lower arm. “And to tell the truth, I went native and I’m now on the run. There’s a contract out on my life.”

“Oh, my word,” the lady exclaimed. She motioned toward the teapot and immediately dropped the Hive Talk. “I think this calls for a cup of tea, young man. It’s freshly brewed, if you’d like one.”

Rowan shrugged. “Sure, why not.”

When the lady had poured the tea, she offered him a biscuit. “Now, tell me all about it,” the lady suggested. “I can’t promise that I can help, but you know, they do say that a problem shared is a problem halved.”

At that point, another customer entered the shop to have a look round, and they changed the subject and began to Hive Talk; but fortunately the lady soon left and they were able to resume their conversation.

At length, the old lady let out a deep sigh. “My word, you have been in the wars, young man.”

The lady paused for a few moments and she spent some time nodding her head from side to side, as if weighing up different options.

“I know that it’s a huge imposition, Gladys, and I recognize the very real risks that you are facing,” he said at length, “but I don’t know any dissidents in this city and I seriously need their help.”

Again the old lady hesitated before she spoke. “Very well, Rowan.”

He looked up sharply. “I don’t believe that I told you my name.”

“Oh, I’m certain that you must have, young man. But no matter. Now, I can’t help you personally, you understand.”

Rowan nodded. “Of course.”

“However, there’s a chip shop just down the road from here. Now, I can’t promise anything, young man, but I can offer you a possibility.”

“Sure,” he acknowledged.

“If you were to go there at one o’clock this afternoon, buy yourself fish and chips and sit outside on the bench eating them, you might meet someone who *can* help you out.”

Rowan broke into a radiant smile and he stood up, reached across the desk and planted a kiss on the old lady’s soft, wrinkled cheek before making a move to leave the shop. “Thank you so much, Gladys, you don’t know how much this means to me. You really are a treasure.”

“Oh, I think I do, Rowan, and you’re welcome. That’s what friends are for,” the old lady smiled back as he turned toward the stairs.

“And I can also tell when someone’s in love,” Gladys added.

He stopped in his tracks and turned back to face her.

“Really? Does it show?”

“Oh yes, naturally,” she nodded. “Now take care and may heaven help you.”

Of course, this was a benevolent warning to one’s own dissident kind as much as an expression of good wishes.

He nodded. “Oh, don’t worry, Gladys: I most certainly will. Thank you once again. And I’m sure that if there really is a heaven, they’ll be sure to save a special place for you.”

13. The chippie

After sitting around in a seedy café for hours idly twiddling his thumbs and trying to stretch out each drink without looking like he was just hogging a table, Rowan arrived back and wandered along to the chip shop at just after ten to one that day. He figured if someone was going to meet him there, they wouldn't want to hang about while he finished eating, and he was feeling too hungry to forego that meal.

Every time someone approached the chippie, Rowan's heart skipped a beat and he had to practise his breathing exercises to calm himself down and relax; but without exception they turned out to be regular customers coming to buy their lunch.

One o'clock came and one o'clock went and still there was no sign of the dissidents. And then, as he sauntered over to the rubbish bin to deposit the greasy remnants of his fish and chips, and when he was least expecting it, a blue car came speeding down the lane toward him. Whoever was driving the car was either in a great hurry or else they'd accidentally jammed the accelerator on the floor.

Rowan immediately tensed up, and he slipped his hand inside his jacket pocket to flip off the safety catch on his disrupter.

The car came to a screeching halt amidst a shower of loose gravel not far from the chip shop and two men in black balaclavas leapt out and ran toward him. He had his disrupter drawn by now and was desperately trying to weigh up whether these masked men were friend or foe.

The men stopped dead in their tracks and one put his hand up. "Rowan Kingsley?" he panted.

"That's me," he nodded, cautiously lowering his weapon.

"Get in! And be quick about it," the man replied, and he and his mate were already running toward the car. Rowan raced after them, flipping the safety catch back on and pocketing the gun.

Even before he was fully in the car, the driver was off and Rowan only just managed to snatch hold of the door and close it before they hit a nearby lamp post. The driver appeared agitated and he kept looking in the rear view mirror – and sure enough,

when Rowan turned and peered out through the rear window, he caught sight of the flashing lights of a patrol car in hot pursuit.

At best, Rowan expected a bumpy ride, and at worst he was terrified that he'd be thrown forward and shatter his skull on the driver's head in front with the force of a two ton elephant, so he hastily buckled himself in.

Then one of the men beside him reached across and pulled a black mask over his head. The eye holes must have been round the back, and the material was dense and closely woven, because now he couldn't see a damn thing.

All he could tell, by the way he was being jostled from side to side was that they were either zigzagging through traffic or through the back streets; and judging by the way he was being thrown forward in one instant and pressed back against the seat in the next, and by the screech of rubber and the revving of the engine, the driver was really giving it his all.

Every now and again, over the sound of the supercharged engine, Rowan thought he could hear a car siren, so the chase must still be on. Being an ex-Enforcer himself, he really couldn't relax and let the driver get on with it, and he couldn't stand not being able to see what the hell was going on and brace for each potential impact. Holly had mentioned on more than one occasion that he had this need to always be in control, and that this was not a good thing; but he found it so difficult to loosen up and place his utmost trust in others.

Finally the car slowed and came to an abrupt stop, though the engine was still running, and he lurched forward in his seat. He heard the passenger door open and one of the men got out and dashed across the road; then there was the sound of rusty hinges like a gate being swung open. The car crept forward a few yards and judging by the way it went dark inside the car, they must have gone under cover. Then he heard the grating of dry hinges again, and at length the driver turned off the engine and breathed an audible sigh of relief. Outside, he could hear the roar of an engine and a siren and by the way both the tone and the volume of the siren rose and then fell, he could tell that the patrol car had caught them up and thankfully gone flying on by. The fact that the driver had sighed before this event must mean that they were already somewhere safe.

The guy beside him in the passenger seat had got out now, then the door nearest him opened and someone had him by the arm and half helped out and half dragged him from the car and marched him off. Judging by the echo of their footsteps on stone or concrete and the fact that the light was so dim, they must have been in some kind of small ground floor garage. A door opened ahead of them and he was led down a passage.

"You're coming to some steps," his guide thoughtfully informed him and he gingerly felt his way until he'd got the measure of the steps, and they climbed to the top. Of course, not realizing that he'd already taken the last step, Rowan reached up for the next, found fresh air under his foot and ended up falling to the floor on his hands and knees, which raised a roar of laughter from his guide. Fortunately, Rowan landed on a patch of soft carpet. The man took hold of him again by the arm and helped him to his feet, and they walked along another passage and finally turned off into a room. He could hear someone dragging a chair across the floor and he was unceremoniously pushed down into the hardback chair. At this point someone turned on an overhead lamp and his vision, though obscured, became a little lighter. Then one of the men came forward and abruptly yanked off Rowan's mask, and until his eyes again became accustomed to the change in light, he was left blinking in the glare of the bright lamps. As for the three men who'd brought him to this place, they made no attempt to remove their own masks, which probably meant that as yet they didn't trust him.

One of the men came forward now and, frisking Rowan, he relieved him of his gun and also his phone. The guy checked the phone and was about to pocket it, when one of the others spoke up.

"Better take out the SIM card," he advised.

"Why?" asked the first man. "The thing's switched off."

"Not fully; it'll still be on standby," insisted a second. "Every now and again, if the battery is charged, the phone will sync with the nearest base station, even if it's switched off. And if it does that, then the Fuss can trace the phone. Just take my word for it and remove the SIM card."

"Okay, you're the boss."

Well, thought Rowan, you learn something new each day.

He'd foolishly assumed that with the phone switched off, he'd be safe.

"Do you think we're still safe here, then?" the first guy asked.

There was a pause before the second guy answered. "Chances are, the thing won't have synced yet and we'll just have to take a chance on it. Of course, another option would be to take a ride across the city, turn the phone on and dump it in a public litter bin. Did I hear you volunteering?"

"Oh no, no way," the first guy replied. "I've had more than enough excitement for one day, thank you very much; so I'm not off out there again if I can help it."

The first guy went back to finish thoroughly frisking Rowan and had him stand up while he probed and patted him down. "Okay, he's clean," he announced at length.

At this point the second guy came forward and took hold of Rowan by the wrist, twisting his hand round and moving him into the light to get a better look.

"What's that?" the guy wanted to know, pointing to Rowan's wrist.

"Oh that? Just a couple of stitches. When I was inside, the Top Dog, a Crim by the name of Harrison took a shine to me. He and his sidekicks beat the shit out of me and put me in hospital."

"Do you remember them cutting you?" the second guy wanted to know.

Rowan shrugged. "Well, I guess so. I was pretty much out of it and when I came to, the medics had patched me up."

The second man turned to the first. "Go get the gear," he requested urgently.

"I'm sure it's nothing. Just a scratch," Rowan shrugged.

The first guy returned with some kind of handheld meter and as soon as he turned it on and Rowan heard the low buzzing, he realized that it was a sweeper. He stood there with his arms held out beside him while the guy systematically swept the device over his legs, torso and his arms. Finally he came to Rowan's right wrist, and as he drew the meter closer, the low buzz of the sweeper became a high pitched whistle.

"Okay, you'd better sit down, mate," the second guy replied. He turned to the first guy. "Go get the first aid kit from the

kitchen and a towel and razor from the bathroom. Right, roll up your sleeve, mate."

Soon enough, the first guy returned and the second guy folded up the towel, placed it on Rowan's knee and carefully positioned Rowan's arm on top of it.

"Sorry mate, but this is going to sting a bit. Still, you're a big boy now. Get a couple of butterfly clips ready, would you? Oh, and I need a pair of tweezers."

Within moments, the guy had reopened the stitches and was fishing around inside with the tweezers while Rowan clenched his other fist and gritted his teeth. Then the man stood up. "Okay, stem the bleeding; then use a couple of butterfly clips to close up the wound; and when that's done, wrap an elasticated bandage around the wrist."

He came forward and showed Rowan what he had caught in his tweezers. It looked like a little black spider with a number of long, flexible silver legs.

"What the hell's that?" Rowan wanted to know.

The man went over to a hearth, placed the thing on the stone tiles and crushed it under foot. There was a faint popping sound and Rowan saw a few wisps of smoke rising into the air as the guy removed his foot.

"While you were in the nick, they must have tagged you, mate. It's a chip implant and it allows the Fuss to track your every movement. It also binds to the nearest nerves so, if needs be, they can even remotely immobilize you."

Rowan had heard of such a thing, but it wasn't familiar with the technology.

"Well, that casts the deciding vote, then folks," the second guy announced. "We can't stay here tonight as we'd planned. We're going to have to make a run for it, and hope to high heaven that the Fuss aren't still prowling the city looking for us."

The second guy thought for a moment and looked at his wristwatch. "Collect the necessaries and take them down to the garage. We'll take the white van. You lot can hunker down in the back and I'll drive. Let's hope and pray that the plates really are clean and that they don't flash up as stolen on any Fuss computer screens. And we need to make doubly sure that the GPS is disconnected in the cab. That also sends out a signal that can be

traced, purportedly for insurance purposes to check if you were speeding at the time of an accident, though of course we all know the real intention.

"Come on, chop chop! We leave in ten minutes, whether you're ready or not."

Moments later, the third guy came dashing back into the room. "Just saw a paddy wagon creeping up the lane," he panted.

"Okay, okay," the second guy replied, raising his hands. "Now everybody stay calm. We knew this might happen, so just treat it as another dress rehearsal. We've been through this enough times. Just grab your personal bags and head for the escape ladder at the back. We'll go up and over the flat roofs. I'll go through the house and make sure that all the internal doors are locked. That should hold them up for long enough."

"If you ask me, this fellah isn't to be trusted," the first guy nodded in Rowan's direction, a scowl on his face. "Since his name was first mentioned, the Fuss have been dogging our every step. Either that or he's jinxed us."

Just as the first guy was bending down to pick up his bag from the floor, Rowan caught sight of a strip of adhesive bandage on his chest.

"Cut yourself shaving?" Rowan asked, coming forward.

"Huh?" the guy grunted.

As he raised his head to look at Rowan, Rowan lashed out with his foot and caught him under his chin with such force that he was thrown backwards to land on the floor, out like a light.

"Hey, what the fuck?" cried the third guy, and he went to grapple Rowan.

Rowan held his hands up and made no move to resist. "Unbutton his shirt and have a look at his chest," he said, nodding in the first man's direction.

The third guy looked to the second for advice.

"Do it," he nodded.

The third guy tore at the man's shirt and Rowan breathed a sigh of relief. "Am I right, or am I right?" he asked.

There was a wire taped to the man's chest, and on one end of it there was a radio microphone.

The second guy came forward, ripped the device from the man's chest, took it across to the hearth and stamped it under foot

while Rowan fished in the man's pockets to retrieve his disrupter and his phone.

"How much does he know?" Rowan asked urgently.

The second man shrugged. "Not much. He's only just joined our cell." Then he thought again. "But that's still too much."

Rowan nodded and he took the safety catch off his disrupter and set the charge to lethal. He fired two quick blasts into the man's chest and a third full in the face, then he turned back to the second man.

"Thanks," the second guy acknowledged. He picked up the man's bag and hooked it over his shoulder. "Okay mate, I think it's time we got out of here."

They left the house through the emergency door, clambered up the fire escape and, keeping low, they ran the whole length of the block, descending into an alleyway at the far end by means of another escape ladder. The second guy seemed to know the area like the back of his hand and he led them on a magical mystery tour through the alleyways and back streets until Rowan was thoroughly lost as, hopefully, would any Fuss who might have attempted to follow them. Every now and again, the second guy would stop and have them lift their feet so he could spray their shoes. It was some kind of repellent they used, just in case the Fuss brought in tracker dogs. Apparently it really got up their hypersensitive noses. Rowan could see that this guy was a thoroughly seasoned veteran.

Finally they came to a dilapidated gate at the back of a house and the second guy reached up to unfasten a catch and let them in before refastening the lock and leading them through a small, rubbish-strewn yard. All the stray cats in the neighbourhood must have been foraging through the black plastic rubbish bags.

There was a light on in a nearby room, but there were thick translucent curtains up at the window so they couldn't see in.

The second man unslung his bags and gave a series of quick bursts on the doorbell. Within moments, a face appeared in the window and shortly afterwards Rowan could hear the drawing of bolts and the door opened to let them in.

"Hello there, Will," a female voice lilted and a woman appeared from behind the door. She reached up, flung her arms around the guy and gave him a peck on the cheek. "What are you

doing here?"

As the petite, raven haired woman appeared and Rowan saw her, his heart leapt, for he recognized Holly an an instant. She looked every bit as beautiful as he'd pictured her in his mind and even more ravishing. When he saw the intimacy with which she greeted the second guy, however, he wasn't simply crestfallen, he was utterly devastated. But then, what else could he expect? It wasn't as if he and Holly had been a steady item before he was sent down, and he couldn't really have expected her to wait that long for him or, for that matter, to wait for him at all.

"It's a long story, Holly, and I'll fill you in with the details later," Will told her. "For now, suffice it to say that we were rumbled and we're in need of a new safe house."

"Not to worry," Holly smiled. "You're here now and you're safe and that's all that really matters. Anyhow, let's not stand on the doorstep. Come in and make yourselves at home."

"Hi John," she smiled as the third guy stepped inside. And then she saw Rowan behind the man and her jaw dropped.

"Oh heavens above!" she whooped. "Rowan! Rowan Kingsley, I can't believe it's you. How on earth did you manage to find me? Oh heavens. This is like all my birthdays rolled into one!"

Holly tugged Rowan inside and began to shower him with kisses, but he pulled away. "Hey, steady on Holly," he said in hushed tones. "Your friend Will is going to get the wrong idea."

Holly appeared puzzled. "What do you mean, get the wrong idea?" she queried, and then it dawned on her. "Oh, you don't think that Will and I have got a thing going between us, do you? That's gross. Well, we have, but not in the way you think. You see, Will is not my lover, silly: he's my elder brother. I managed to persuade him to move to the city and set up a dissident cell here."

In an instant, Rowan's day brightened up again. Now that Will had his mask off, he could clearly see the man's black hair and green eyes and the striking family resemblance. With tears streaming down his face, he held his arms out and spent some time hugging Holly whilst the other two went inside and kindly left them to it.

"So how did you manage to locate me, Rowan?" Holly

wanted to know as she came back through to the cramped living room with a tray of coffee mugs and freshly cut sandwiches.

"*The Bumper Book of Classic Jokes*," he informed her. "Well, you did say I'd find it enlightening. I noticed that the letter you'd left me was marking a page in the book. All the jokes on that page were about knitting, and that reminded me of the lady who runs the bookshop where you got the book and of her fondness for knitting. So I went on the internet, made a list of secondhand bookshops and went from one to the next until I finally found her. She arranged for Will and John and another guy to meet up with me. And here I am."

"I'll get back to that in a minute, Rowan, but what other guy?" Holly asked, anxiously turning toward Will. "You didn't have a mishap on the way, did you?"

"Danny didn't make it," Will replied. "We'd had a lot of trouble with the Fuss earlier and Rowan here noticed that Danny had a wire on him."

"A wire?" she queried.

"A radio microphone," Will explained.

"So you've been rumbled."

Will nodded. "Yes. Fortunately Danny hasn't been in our cell for long enough to find out much. As a matter of routine, we've never used anything other than our first names. All the same, I think that we should proceed on the assumption that the Fuss now know who we are. I don't know about you, but John and Rowan here are going to have to get out of the city."

"Well, that's settled. If Rowan goes, then I'm going with him," Holly decided. "Apart from anything, I can't abide having to live in seclusion all the time for fear of being arrested, and that is grossly unfair to little Jonathan. Heavens, I really, really wish that we could get away from the damn Hive for good, but the bastards are everywhere. I mean it, no matter which way you turn, every time, there they are. I ask you: when will the subterfuge and the misery ever end?"

Will smiled and gently patted Holly's shoulder to console her. "In that case we'll all go, Holly."

"So when do we go?" she asked, snapping out of her mood. "Give me an hour and I can be packed. Most of my things are still in bags, anyway, in case there's the chance of a raid and I have to

move fast. Heavens, being cooped up like this is making me so paranoid and it's a wonder I haven't gone grey prematurely."

Will checked his watch. "Well, it's getting late. Let's leave it until bright and early tomorrow morning. And in the meantime, I'll see if they can rustle up some transportation for us. We had to leave a car and a van at the safe house, and there's no way we can go back there."

Holly turned back to Rowan. "Sorry about the digression, Rowan. You were telling me how you'd traced Gladys."

"That's right," he nodded, only too happy to change the subject.

"Well, I don't know how you fathomed all that out from the jokes *inside* the book," she laughed. "I didn't even know that there were any jokes in the book about knitting. You see, I didn't pick a page, I just inserted the letter in the book at random. So finding the knitting was simply serendipitous."

"Seren-what-icus?" he asked. "That's a word I don't know."

Holly laughed. "Serendipitous, Rowan. It's not a word that features in Hive vocabulary and it implies that our lives are guided not by the Hive Mentality but by the subtle agents of destiny, and they are not without a sense of humour. There's much more to it that this, but let's just say that at the very least it's an amazing coincidence; indeed, serendipity is little short of a miracle. When we're feeling down in the dumps, it often surfaces unexpectedly and gives us a minor encouragement. In effect, what destiny is telling us is that we're on the right track."

"How do you get this serendipity, then?" he wanted to know.

Holly laughed, presumably about his naivety. "You don't, silly. It's like getting a wild bird to feed from your hand. The bird will never come to you if you go out stalking birds and attempting to catch them. You have to be be very patient and gradually build up their confidence, trusting that eventually, when you're ready and they're ready, they will come to you. It also requires that you cultivate an attitude of gratitude, even before you have been rewarded, rather than after the event. And when you are eventually rewarded, it is largely because of that gratitude. In this respect, as in so many things, the Hive Minded are completely arse about face."

"Arse about face?"

“Facing the wrong way,” she explained. “When they do someone a favour, more often than not, there’s a concealed motive, which is that they’ve learnt that this is a good way of having a favour returned and of being praised or otherwise rewarded. Heavens, you could easily train your dog to do that much, and it’s nothing more noble than crude social conditioning. In contrast, however, the way we try to go about things is to do someone a favour simply *because* it’s the right thing and a good thing to do, without any thought of reward, simply trusting that whatever is meant to be will be. And yet *they* are the ones who speak so loudly and so often about Our Greater Good and consider themselves to be the only true paragons of virtue. Go figure.”

Holly nodded to herself, as if she’d had a fresh thought. “I have a new exercise for you, Rowan, and it this. Every now and then, instead of breathing slowly and deeply, pant for a few counts, then return to your normal breathing. When you are practising your breathing, as you inhale, silently say your mantra, the *Om mani padme hum* that I taught you. And each time you exhale, just say *Thank you*. And when you’ve got the hang of that, perhaps even alternate your thank you with the words *I love you*.

“Above all, really come to see and feel the presence of the friend and the spirit in everything, and really mean it with all your heart. Be thankful for everything, without condition; and simply be thankful that the friend is here, even if she is silent. You’ll find that difficult at first, of course, but as the saying goes: just fake it till you make it. Your effort will prove well worth it in the end.”

“But anyhow, that’s by the by, and I’m digressing again. Back to the book. Truth be told, I simply hoped that you’d be able to track down the lady at the bookshop who sold me that book. I was worried that if I said any more than that, the Fuss might smell something fishy and track me down the same way. Basically, I figured that if you really, really wanted to find me – and for the right reasons – that destiny would help you find a way; and if not, I hoped that you’d at least be decent enough to leave me alone.”

It was Rowan’s turn to laugh.

“Anyhow people, as hostess I’m forgetting my manners,” Holly continued, clapping her hands together. “Eat your sandwiches before they start to dry out and your coffee goes cold.

The only important thing is that you made it here safe and sound."

A few minutes later, Holly came across and sat down beside Rowan, and she gently stroked his arm. "And then Mister, I think we should take an early night."

"Do we have an early start?" he queried.

"No, no. So you can relax, sweetie," Holly replied, shaking her head and surreptitiously running her hand over his lap. She took his hand in hers and placed it on her own warm thigh and he could feel the clasp of her suspenders and stocking top through the thin cheesecloth of her skirt.

"However," she added at length, "we do have a lot of catching up to do."

The others had discreetly left the room by now, pretending to busy themselves in the kitchen and Holly looked furtively around to make sure they weren't overlooked. Then she took his hand and ran it up her shin and over the inside of her thigh, pushing back the hem of her skirt as she went and revealing the sheer black stockings that she was wearing. His heart thrilled as he felt her warm, silky flesh beneath his fingers and she gently ran his hand over her tiny green silk panties and pressed her thighs together.

Rubbing her hand over his groin, Holly came close and whispered in his ear. "Is that a banana in your lunch box, or are you just pleased to see me?"

When he finally grasped Holly's meaning, Rowan could feel his face flush in embarrassment.

"But first things first," Holly beamed, abruptly standing up and tugging him to his feet. "Let's go help the lads tidy up in the kitchen."

14. Bringing up Jonathan

It took a good week to make arrangements, but finally the big day arrived. Just after sunrise, an old high-sided furniture removals wagon turned up at the door and Holly, Jonathan, Will and John clambered into the back of the wagon. Once they were safely locked inside, Rowan went to sit beside the driver up front in the cab and they set off on their long drive north.

They hadn't gone more than thirty miles when Rowan spotted the flashing blue lights in the rear view mirror, and when he heard the brief wail of the siren, an awful wave of fear swept over him.

"Here we go," the driver said, flicking on his indicator, slowing the vehicle and pulling in by the side of the road.

Rowan's hand went to his jacket pocket and he released the safety catch of his disrupter. He did contemplate drawing the weapon, but then thought better of it.

A few moments later, a face appeared at the driver's side and a uniformed figure rapped on the window.

The driver wound down the window. "Yes, officer, what can we do for you?" the man enquired, a nervous quiver in his voice.

"Would you mind stepping out of the vehicle, please, sir?" the patrol officer requested, and casting a worried look in Rowan's direction, he complied.

"What appears to be the trouble, officer?" the driver asked.

"It's just a routine vehicle check, sir," came the reply. "So if you wouldn't mind going round the back and opening her up ..."

Rowan drew in a deep breath and tried to remain calm. He opened the door at his side, clambered out of the high cab and sauntered round to join them as the driver opened up the tall rear doors.

"And what have we got here, sir?" the officer wanted to know, seeing Holly, Jonathan, Will and John sitting inside the wagon. There was a light on in the back and they'd made themselves comfortable on a settee and easy chair.

Will had stood up by now and he looked like he was on the verge of leaping on the patrol officer, but Rowan shook his head

vigorously.

"Just some friends," Rowan offered. "They're helping us move to our new apartment, and this was the only available transportation."

The patrol officer raised his eyebrows and turned to the driver. "As we're sure you're aware, sir, your heavy goods licence does not permit you to carry passengers."

"The driver shrugged. "Sorry, officer."

"Anyhow, out you come, and have your identity cards ready: we shall want to check them."

Damn it, that was the very last thing they needed.

The others clambered out and one by one they handed over their cards to the officer and went to stand, fidgeting nervously, by the side of the road. Again, Rowan was tempted to draw his weapon, but he knew that if he did, they'd have a body and an abandoned patrol car to deal with, too.

"Right," the officer requested. "Stay where you are while we go and check these on the computer."

Holly and Rowan exchanged worried glances, knowing full well that as soon as the patrol officer inserted their ID, alarm bells would be ringing. As yet, there hadn't been time to arrange new identities.

Rowan thought fast and as the officer returned to his patrol car, he followed him.

"Go back and stand with your friends, sir," the officer requested, halting in his tracks and waving Rowan away.

"We have to talk to you, officer," Rowan replied in hushed tones.

"We shan't tell you again, sir," the officer replied sternly, nervously running his hand over his gun holster and unbuttoning it. Rowan weighed up the odds. Chances were that with his own disrupter in his inside jacket pocket, the officer would beat him to the draw.

There was only one thing for it. He had to break his oath of secrecy.

"Listen," Rowan insisted. "We're with Special Investigations."

The patrol officer took this in his stride and turned to face Rowan. "Then we'd like to see your warrant card, sir."

"We're working undercover," Rowan told him, ushering the man further away from the others. "So we don't have our warrant card with us. However, we can give you a number. Phone that number and ask to speak to Special Investigator Morrison. He'll vouch for us."

The officer took out his notepad and wrote down the number and the extension. "Wait here," he requested curtly and he got back in his patrol car. He was on the car phone for a minute or two and then he motioned toward Rowan. "It would appear that your story checks out, sir. Special Investigator Morrison would like a word with you."

"Not now," Rowan replied under his breath.

"The Special Investigator was most insistent."

"We can't," Rowan insisted, shaking his head. "This could blow our cover and jeopardize an operation that has taken years to set up. Tell him that we can't talk now, but assure him that we'll be in touch as soon as it's safe to do so."

"Very well," the officer shrugged and he went back to his car to relay Rowan's message.

A few moments later, the man returned and handed back their identity cards. "Very well, sir, all would appear to be in order, and we'll overlook the licensing offence. So you can go on your way. All hail the Hive."

"One last thing, officer. Do you have your card reader with you?" Rowan enquired.

"Well, yes, but why?" the man wanted to know.

"So that we can grease your palm, officer."

The officer glared at him angrily and again he was fingering his holster. "That is an insult, sir. We don't take bribes in the Service. You know, we have a good mind to arrest you anyway – and damn the consequences."

Rowan raised his hands to calm the man down. "Hey, *I* know that and *you* know that, but the others don't, you see. This is for the sake of keeping up appearances, you understand."

"Oh, we see." Finally the officer got his meaning. He fished in his jacket pocket and brought out his card reader. Making sure that he was in plain sight of the others, Rowan inserted his own temporary credit card in the reader and tapped at the keypad. Then once the transaction had gone through, he removed and

pocketed his card.

"Thank you for your help and understanding, officer. Buy yourself something nice. All hail," Rowan nodded and he turned and trotted back to rejoin the others who were still anxiously waiting by the roadside.

"What happened?" Holly wanted to know as he handed back their identity cards and ushered them back into the wagon. She looked quite tense and agitated and beads of sweat were forming on her brow and dripping down her cheeks. It was a good thing that the patrol officer hadn't returned with him, for there was no disguising the utter fear written all over Holly's face. This is what she had to live with, just a whisker away; day in and day out.

"You can relax now, sweetheart. The officer was willing to take a backhander," Rowan answered, as he helped the driver shut the big back doors. "We'll tell you all about it later."

"Now, let's be on our way before the guy changes his mind," he whispered, so that young Jonathan couldn't overhear. "If he does, then I'll have no option but to shoot to kill."

Thankfully, the rest of the journey went without any further hitches. After a long and bumpy ride in the old wagon, they arrived safely at Chelmsford where they'd attempt to start afresh and rebuild their tattered lives.

Life for Holly, Rowan and Jonathan in Chelmsford was a little easier than it had been in the city. Fortunately, it was a small town with only a token presence of Enforcers, and though there were CCTV cameras in some of the larger shops, there were none in the town centre and the cameras were not as yet hooked up to Service HQ. So they could pretty much come and go as they pleased, having changed their appearance, using the false identities with which they'd been provided.

The only thing that they daren't do was be seen travelling around by car, since by default any private vehicle that passed a patrol car automatically had its registration plate and the faces of its driver and passenger scanned, fed into the computer and checked against the national database for a possible match.

And of course when it came to schooling, they had to be very, very careful what they said in front of Jonathan in case he inadvertently revealed something to his playmates or teachers at school. If they'd had the choice, Holly would have home-

schooled the lad, but that option had been outlawed many years ago, when she was herself a child. At the time, the authorities had claimed that this was in order to promote and maintain high and consistent standards of education, though she knew full well that what they really wanted to do was make sure they caught and conditioned the kids at an early age. But in any case, even if the law still permitted home-schooling, that would not have been a wise move, for no Hive-respecting citizen would have considered home-schooling, and it would have pretty much amounted to an admission to a dissident tendency, which would have been suicidal.

Whenever Jonathan and his chums were around, they'd have to use Hive Talk and resort to coded phrases that would sound innocuous to the masses, yet convey a hidden depth of meaning to their fellow dissidents who were in the know. So they'd talk of "making a lot of fuss", say, if they spotted an Enforcer. They'd use other loaded phrases when they recognized their kind; words that rhymed with others that only a dissident would understand; words with double or even triple meanings that only they would find funny; and of course, there were a great many subtle cues to which those of a Hive Mentality – these Straights or Sleepwalkers as they were sometimes known – were simply oblivious.

Just by way of example, any dissident worth her salt could smell and was aware of the delicate scent of sex; or conversely, for that matter, the pungent odour of regulation issue soap. She was aware of it because it actually physically and emotionally aroused her. She was open to this experience and she knew what this arousal meant. Contrast that with the threadbare lives of the Hive. The nearest they ever got to having sex was to have a sperm sample extracted from them or to be impregnated with that sperm. You know, the sort of clinical procedure you'd find at a modern factory farm. And people didn't even give birth naturally these days: in their wisdom, the Hive Doctors had the baby surgically removed. To them, it was more about their duty to rear decent Hive-abiding children than anything; and they were rapidly forgetting what real love, community spirit and Mother Nature herself were all about. In short, as her dear mother would lament from time to time, the tail was wagging the dog. If Mother could see the world as it had now become, bless her, she'd be turning in

her grave.

Speaking of nature, this was Rowan's first time away from the noise and the grime and the hustle and bustle of the big city, and they'd spend hours walking and sitting together in the nearby park, drinking in the fresh air and the fragrance of the flowers and listening to the birds. The park was teeming with twittering birds of all kinds. This was the nearest Rowan had ever been to nature, and certainly as close to heaven as he'd ever been, and even this came as a minor revelation to him. He simply adored their walks and, like a small child, he was fascinated and wanted to know the name of every plant, tree, bird and butterfly that they came upon. Rowan's favourite pursuits were sitting there beneath the canopy of a magnificent, gnarled and twisted oak tree; watching the blue tits pecking at a hanging feeder and the bees collecting pollen from the rose bushes that filled the borders of the park. Even the smell of freshly mown grass was novel and a delight to Rowan. As for Jonathan, all he wanted to do was feed the ducks in the pond and feed his own face on icecream, though she had to keep him away from the geese which were far too pushy and aggressive. He simply couldn't get enough of the ducks or the icecream

But anyhow, back to Jonathan. On the face of it, then, bringing up Jonathan would present them with a huge and complex challenge, and there was no guarantee that when he was old enough to be let in on the Big Secret, that he would take to their dissident ways. For all they knew, Jonathan might never be sufficiently mature, wise and discreet, and they'd simply have to live with that sad fact. There could not be – nor should there be – any question of compulsion.

There was one thing that truly haunted Holly and which she hardly dare think about, and that was the grim prospect that Jonathan might turn against her, Will and Rowan and become a liability. Perish the thought, but if that happened, she might have to abandon Jonathan or cut him off from her life entirely. She'd actually seen this happen with two dear friends of hers, and they'd all heard the horror stories on the dissident grapevine, and the consequences were devastating. But no matter how much she loved the little dear, in such an event, she would have no other option. However grim, the truth was that too many lives were at

stake. Indeed, there were some dissident cells, especially the more militant whose members faced the threat of execution, that refused to consider anyone who had children in their family, for precisely these reasons. But then, at the end of the day, who were they doing this for, if not for the sake of their children and their children's children? If anything, it was they who were the "Good Cause" and not the movement itself.

If there was a bright spot amidst these dull grey clouds, it was Holly's recognition that in spite of the odds stacked against them, her own dear mother and father had succeeded eminently well in their task in this benighted realm and she and Will had landed sunny side up and turned out okay.

Holly did what she could, of course, to give Jonathan as normal a life as possible. So they'd do the kind of thing that normal, Hive-abiding families would do. They took Jonathan to the park and bought him hotdogs and icecream and chocolate bars; and of course when he was inside, he loved to watch the children's programmes on the television. They'd let him bring his playmates home with him and have birthday celebrations; and when he was older, they'd let him go round to his friends' houses or, since the road outside their flat was pedestrianized, they'd let him play out in the street and the nearby playground.

Yes, sadly, they had to give in when Jonathan repeatedly pestered them for the latest trendy clothes and accessories. The last thing that they could afford to do was have the lad stand out like a sore thumb. Of course, these fashion clothes were cleverly designed to last just long enough to be out of warranty before falling apart. Their one redeeming feature was that they were were made of self-cleaning fabric, because if there was muck about, somehow kids always managed to find it.

And they also eventually caved in to his incessant requests for a cap gun so that he and his mates could play Enforcers and Dissidents. Needless to say, the Enforcers always got their man. Even now, and still in short pants, the lad was being trained for adult life as a Hide-abiding citizen, and at this stage there wasn't a damn thing that they could do to counter either the subtle or the blatant childhood grooming.

On the plus side, Will was always a fun guy to be with and he made a great uncle; and, being more grounded in Hive Culture,

Rowan provided Jonathan with a solid foundation from which to grow. He was Mister Dependable. And it worked both ways, of course, for Rowan still had so much to learn; and sharing a simple family life with them, just like little Jonathan, he came on in leaps and bounds.

Indeed, this was a major growth period for them all and it brought real meaning, purpose, celebration, joy and love into their lives. These were a part of a timeless and nonpartisan tradition that secretly bridged the awesome divide between Hive and Dissident, and which they could freely pass onto their children without fear of censure. And it was simple pleasures and transferable skills such as these that offered them the greatest hope for a brighter future.

15. A familiar face

Rowan was just heading up town with Holly to take Jonathan to school, one day, when he caught sight of a man heading toward them and he instantly recognized him. His grey and black striped tee shirt had ex-con written all over it, just as burgundy would give away the wino to the tutored eye of an Enforcer. A dead giveaway, indeed. The masses, of course, were oblivious to these subconscious clues and to the secret industry behind them. This gave a whole new meaning to the phrase, "Suits you, sir." As the man approached, he spotted them, too, and they met halfway. It was Elder Archer, no less.

He reached out his hand and the man pumped it for all it was worth. "Well, well! If it isn't our old friend …" the man began, but at this point Holly intervened, shaking her head and directing the man's attention to young Jonathan. He was still too young to understand, but he was quick on the uptake.

"This is an old pal, Archer. We met when we were working away from home," Rowan announced and he introduced Holly.

El touched the brim of his woolly hat in greeting and Rowan could see that his hair was unusually short beneath it. Having been released before Rowan, that must mean that he'd spent another spell in jail, and he delicately broached the issue.

"'Fraid so," El replied. "That's why we left the city. We figured it would be easier to keep our nose clean. Or at least less likely that we'd come a cropper."

Less likely to get caught, that was. So, clearly the poor guy hadn't made it to Arcadia yet, except maybe in his dreams. Or if he had, then it hadn't done him one iota of good.

Little Jonathan was by now straining at the leash, tugging at Rowan's hand and eager to be off to see his playmates before school started, and Rowan glanced at his watch. "Look, Archer. We're just on the way to take our nipper to school. But how's about we meet up later and talk about old times?"

Getting down on his haunches, El fished in his pocket, brought out a pen and an old till receipt and scribbled something on the back.

“That’s the address,” he announced, handing over the note. “We’ll be in all day, so just call whenever is convenient,” and again touching his hand to his woolly hat, the man was off down the street.

Having left Jonathan at school, Rowan and Holly headed off across town to El’s place and after a little searching they found the address. It turned out that he had a poky little attic flat in a house in the old town.

“Excuse the mess,” El apologized, waving his arms around. He went over to the settee and cleared a space, dumping the heap of dirty washing on the floor instead. No self-respecting dissident would live in such a pig sty. “Take a seat,” he offered and waited until they were settled. “Now, would you like a tea or a coffee?”

Rowan politely declined, having seen the deplorably unclean state of the empty mug in El’s hand and gently nudging Holly with his elbow. “Thanks all the same, but we had a drink before we came out.”

“Right, oh. Well, feel free to change your mind if you fancy one later. If you’ll excuse us, we’ll just pop through to the kitchen for a minute. Don’t go away: we shan’t be long.”

El left the room and headed for the kitchen, closing the door behind him and Holly turned to Rowan.

“Rowan, there’s something wrong.”

Rowan was puzzled. “How do you mean?”

“Don’t ask me why, sweetie, but there’s something wrong here. I think that we should leave.”

He shook his head. “El’s an old friend, Holly. We’re his guests and we can’t just walk out on him.”

“Then we should leave at the earliest opportunity. Please, you have to trust me on this one.”

Five minutes later, El returned from the kitchen, and he was empty-handed. He’d taken his coat off but he was still wearing his woolly hat. Perhaps he felt embarrassed walking around with shaved hair, looking like he’d just been released from jail, as indeed he had.

“Sorry for the delay, folk, we suddenly remembered that we had to make a phone call.”

“You don’t have to Hive Talk with us, you know, El,” Holly spoke up.

“Oh, sorry. It’s just that we’re trying to keep out of trouble. Two spells in jail was enough for us.”

A sudden thought occurred to Rowan and he got up from the settee and casually wandered across the room. As he passed El, he reached out and snatched the woolly hat from the man’s head.

“Hey, whatcha doing?” El wanted to know.

When Holly saw the telltale scars on the man’s shaven head, which were still slightly red and inflamed, she sprang to her feet. The man hadn’t been back inside, he’d been lobotomized – or Robotomized as the dissidents more accurately called it, poor devil – and her intuition had been spot on. You had to avoid these unfortunate people like the plague. “Let’s get out of here, Rowan.”

“Oh, you’re not leaving us so soon are you? The party hasn’t started yet,” El pleaded, rising to his feet. Rowan pushed him back down in his seat and headed for the door, hot on Holly’s heels.

“‘Fraid so, old chap,” he called back. “I’m really sorry, but something urgent has come up. We’ll see you later.”

They managed to reach the top of the stairs, but they got no further. Fat boy Harrison was clambering up the final flight with his sidekicks in tow. And it occurred to Rowan then that the ape must have already got wind that they’d moved to the town. Something must have given them away prior to El’s phone call.

“There you are, you see,” El called out. He came up behind them and addressed Harrison and as he did so, he surreptitiously slipped something into Rowan’s pocket. “We told you we’d seen ‘em the other day. Maybe now you believe us? That’s got to be worth an ounce of weed.”

Well, that explained the mystery.

Harrison was almost at the top of the stairs now and though Rowan could have easily handled El behind him, there was only one way out. Drawing a deep breath, he ran at the stairs full pelt and dived at Harrison. He caught the man with his head right in the pit of his stomach, throwing him backwards. The man tumbled noisily down the stairs, making the floor shudder. His arms and legs flailing uselessly, he bowled over his two sidekicks and knocked the stuffing out of them before finally crashing into the wall at the bottom and coming to rest.

Justice had been a bit slow on the uptake but had finally caught up with Harrison, and he was hospitalized, of course. Harrison had broken his jaw and spent weeks sipping food through a straw. But that was the least of his worries, for he'd also damaged his spine and never walked again.

Ignoring his own pains, Rowan scrambled to his feet, grabbed hold of Holly's hand and they took the stairs two at a time, clambering over the prone men and heading for the front door. As soon as they were outside, Rowan clicked the speed dial on his phone to get hold of Will.

"Will?" he yelled into the phone, thinking fast. "We've been rumbled. Plan B: get the van and bring it straight round to the school. Holly and I are heading there now to pick up Jonathan, by force if necessary. Yes. Okay, I've got that. See you there in ten minutes."

As they were heading for the school, Rowan again fished in his pocket to double check that he'd switched off his phone and as he did so, something fluttered to the ground.

It must have caught Holly's eye, because she stopped in her tracks and chased after it as it fluttered away in the breeze.

"You dropped something," she announced, catching him up.

"Thanks, sweetie," he replied, forcing a smile and, seeing that it was just a piece of paper, he thrust it into his pocket and again increased his pace. "Remind me to pull the SIM card from the phone when we next get a chance, because when Jonathan doesn't turn up for school tomorrow, questions will be asked and the Fuss won't be far behind."

"Hey, slow down tiger," Holly called, desperately trying to keep pace with him. "My legs aren't as long as yours, you know."

"Sorry." He slackened his pace just a little so that Holly didn't have to trot to keep up.

"So where do we go from here?" he asked.

"It's okay, sweetie, Will and I have already planned for that eventuality. We have people at Horsham a few miles further north and we'll hole up there for a while until something more permanent can be sorted out."

"Oh heavens," Holly sighed and she looked uncharacteristically crestfallen. "We're going have to go through settling into a new place with new identities all over again. And I

haven't the foggiest idea how we'll sort out poor Jonathan. Most likely we'll have to keep him away from school altogether and hide him. When children start school or move to a new school, they always take biometrics – things like iris recognition – and then it's only a matter of time before the Fuss check the database and find a match. I can see that this is going to be an absolute bloody nightmare. Heavens above, I wish there were a way to finally escape the Hive."

Anyhow, five minutes later Holly had retrieved Jonathan from the school, spinning the teacher a tale about a doctor's appointment, and Will and John had turned up with the van. It would be a bumpy ride sitting on the floor in the back, but if nothing else, they'd be good company.

Of course, Jonathan was old enough by now to know that something was amiss.

"Mummy," he began, as Holly bundled him into the back of the van. "We thought you told Teacher Sharpe that you had to take us to the doctor? But we only went there last week and she said that there was nothing wrong with us. And anyway, why can't we walk? It's only round the corner from school."

Rowan exchanged glances with Holly and she merely raised her eyebrows. This was going to take some explaining and he could see that Holly did not relish the difficult task ahead of her.

While he still remembered, Rowan pulled the phone out of his pocket to remove the SIM card, and he advised John to do the same for him and Will. And again, the paper popped out of his pocket and fluttered to the ground.

"That piece of paper has a will of its own," Holly laughed and she picked it up. Rowan casually unfolded it to see if it was worth keeping. If not, he'd chuck the blessèd thing.

"What's that?" Holly wanted to know, having a nosy.

"You tell us," he shrugged. There was a crude map of some kind on the paper, drawn in ink. "We must have absentmindedly picked it up by mistake on our travels."

"Well, that 'W' on the coast has got to be Widdensborough, not that far north of here," she said, padding her finger on the map. "There's a large promontory there with the remnants of an ancient castle, and bays carved out to the north and south."

Rowan was puzzled. "Well, if that's the east coast, then what

on earth is that?" Over the other side of the map, still further east, there was another, less extensive coastline with a large 'A' written on it in a large circle.

Holly shrugged. "There is nothing there, Rowan. There's just sea."

"Oh well, we're sure it's not important," he replied, and he was about to screw the paper up and throw it away, but had second thoughts and put it back in his jacket pocket. He'd give it another chance and if the note popped out a third time, trying to escape, then he'd throw it away.

After a tortuous three hour drive, they arrived on the outskirts of Horsham and not having a street map, whether they liked it or not, they had to ask for directions. Before he'd taken the SIM card out, John had phoned ahead and when they arrived at the safe house there was someone there to greet them. Their contact had brought supplies with him to see them through for a couple of days whilst further arrangements were made. The man didn't give his name and nor did they. Unfortunately, with things the way they were, the less they knew about one-another the better for all concerned, and the man was taking a big enough risk as it was.

Later that evening, after they'd eaten and Jonathan had brushed his teeth and was safely tucked up in bed, Holly came to sit beside Rowan and they spent an hour or two relaxing as best they could.

"Jonathan is not a happy bunny," Holly confided. "I spun him another yarn about taking him away on holiday as a surprise, but my gut is telling me that I'm digging myself deeper and deeper into a hole with each fib I tell him. That lad is as bright as a button. I didn't tell you, Rowan, but the other day Jonathan happened to mention that his playmate Barnard's father had said that he thinks I have dissident tendencies."

"Oops."

"Oops and ouch, indeed," Holly nodded. "I didn't even know until that moment, that Jonathan had already added 'dissident tendencies' to his vocabulary. That's a lot of syllables and a hefty concept for a six year old to carry, for crying out loud. And this kind of thing is happening more and more these days – I mean, with kids in general."

Rowan reached out and put his arm around Holly and drew

her closer to him. “Perhaps it’s time we dropped the pretence and told him the whole story, Holly?” he suggested.

Holly pursed her lips and slowly blew out her breath and she didn’t have to say any more: the meaning was quite clear.

Had Holly known that all this time, instead of being tucked up in bed, Jonathan had been quietly listening at the keyhole, steam would instead have been erupting from her ears. But at this time they were all blissfully unaware of the lad’s suspicions.

It had been a long and stressful day, and they were both dog tired. So tired, in fact, that within minutes of cuddling up together, they both fell fast asleep. Will was still too agitated to relax and so he kept an eye out for unwelcome guests through the window and watched over them that evening.

“Heavens!” Rowan exclaimed, waking up all of a sudden. “Oh I’m sorry, I just had a minor revelation,” he apologized, having inadvertently put the others on red alert. Holly was wide awake and Will was on his feet, ready to take on all comers.

Holly looked at her watch. “Well, it’s getting late and we should be turning in, just in case we have to be away from here early tomorrow. Anyone fancy a cocoa?”

There were nods all round.

When Holly had returned and settled on the settee again, Rowan brought out the map and placed it on her knee.

“I think that I know what the ‘A’ stands for,” he informed them. “A while back when I was inside, I met a guy called El. He’s the one who dobbed us in to Harrison. Anyhow, he had this dream – I mean this fantasy – of finding his way to some mythical paradise he called Arcadia.”

Holly raised her eyebrows, but said nothing.

“I didn’t notice at the time, but I must have noticed subconsciously, because I just dreamt about it. Anyhow, while Harrison was coming up the stairs he must have slipped this map into my pocket. You see that land mass off the coast to the east? I’ll bet my last credit that the ‘A’ stands for Arcadia.”

Holly laughed. “It may well be, sweetie, but that’s not going to help us much. As I said, there is nothing east of here, other than sea.”

“Oh well, it was worth a shot,” he sighed.

“Do you know that for a fact, sis’?” Will asked Holly, coming

toward her.

"Well no," she faltered. "Thinking about it, I guess not. That's just what we've all been told."

Will took the map from her lap and studied it for some time and he smiled. "You know, once upon a time, when we were just kids, I remember Mother telling me a bedtime story about a place over the sea that was free from the Hive, and I'm almost certain the name was something like Arcadia or Arcady. Of course, as Rowan suggests, it might just have been a fairytale.

"But you know as well as I do that even if it did exist, the Hive Masters would have made sure it was erased from the record and that folk were kept away from there."

That raised Rowan's spirits immensely. "Well, El must have thought it very important, or he wouldn't have run the risk of passing the map on to me," he offered.

Will scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Call it a hunch, but I think that if we get the chance, we should head over to Widdensborough and research this ourselves. If there is any land east of there, whatever it might really be called, then someone there is sure to know."

"I'm tempted to agree, Holly," Rowan nodded. "I mean, what have we got to lose? And if nothing else comes of it, Widdensborough would be as good a place to settle down again as any."

Will had a thought. "It strikes me that if the only other place marked on the map is Widdensborough that this must be significant and it surely can't be coincidental that this is the one place on the coast that is closest to the other land mass. And let's face facts, no matter where we go in this land, they're going to be on our tail again sooner or later and none of us are getting any younger. Do you really still want to be on the run when you're in your dotage, if there's even a slim chance of getting out of the game for good?"

Holly raised her hands. "Okay, okay, you've twisted my arm. Will and I will see what we can arrange. In purely practical terms, we might as well go somewhere decent and with a purpose rather than somewhere picked from the map purely at random. Only don't blame me if it all goes pear-shaped."

"Hey, lady," Will chided Holly, coming over to playfully

tickle her ribs. “Let’s not put a jinx on the operation before we even embark, through unnecessary and uncalled-for negative thinking.”

“Sorry, Will,” she apologized sheepishly. “I’m just tired, that’s all.”

“I know what you’re going through,” Rowan replied in soothing tones, gently squeezing Holly’s hand.

“No, Rowan, you don’t know the half of it. You just think you know.”

Rowan clasped Holly’s hand in his. “Maybe not, but I can *imagine* what you must be going through right now, and I do feel for you, Holly. I really do.”

“And I’ll be eternally grateful to you, Holly, for bringing me back to my senses, so that I *can* feel for others,” he added.

Again Holly became serious. “Promise me something, Rowan,” she asked in earnest.

“Sure, anything,” he nodded. “Just name it and it’s yours.”

She clasped Rowan’s hand tightly. “Promise me then, beloved, that if they do catch us, that they don’t take me alive.”

The colour drained from Rowan’s face and he shuddered at the thought.

“Don’t worry, dearest,” he hastily replied, forcing a smile. “They won’t catch us again.”

16. Widdensborough

When they arrived in Widdensborough, the first thing they did was book in for a night at a small, run-down hotel overlooking the seafront and harbour. Even simple pleasures like trips to the seaside were falling by the wayside these days as the demands of "the Work" encroached more and more on their increasingly impoverished lives. Not yet having adapted to these changing times and diversified, half the shops and hotels in town had shut down and the premises had been boarded up.

Will had managed to get hold of a temporary credit card, and they used that, in order to preserve their anonymity. The landlady did give them the hairy eyeball when Will presented it, but the credits on the card were as good as any other, so she accepted the payment without any fuss.

It was near enough lunchtime when they arrived and once they'd freshened up, the five of them went for a brisk walk along the seafront in the bracing sea breeze. You could smell the seaweed and actually taste the salt in the air. If nothing else, the walk would be good exercise and it would blow away a few cobwebs.

They found a small café not far from the harbour and so they had real fresh, locally caught battered fish. That went down a treat, of course, and little Jonathan wolfed his food down, though Holly thought the mass-produced microwaved chips and vivid green processed peas were a bit of a let down. The peas were so bright green that she thought they might perhaps glow in the dark. That might well have been the case, for all food was irradiated these days, supposedly so that it didn't rot in transit and storage.

Of course if shops sold locally grown produce, instead of shipping it hundreds of miles from humongous factory farms to processing plants, to warehouses and finally to local shops, then that would not be a problem; but that's not the way the Hive worked. It was all about efficiency, economy of scale, profit and bureaucratic entanglement; and simple, old-fashioned, folk remedies like common sense didn't get a look in.

Holly had seen a few fellow dissidents as they'd wandered

along the seafront toward the café, and she and Will had exchanged covert greetings with them, though bless him, Rowan had been largely oblivious of their presence. And now that their stomachs were feeling satisfyingly full, Holly thought that it was about time they made first contact, so the first thing she did was send Jonathan off with Uncle John to have a go on the amusements and find an icecream.

The amusements were a bit of a con, of course, because they ate your credits and if you won, they paid out in tokens which you had to spend on expensive toys on the premises. What the hell, Holly shrugged: the lad would have fun, the rides would be exhilarating, and it would keep him occupied and out of the way for an hour or two while they went about their clandestine business. In two or three years time, the conditioning would really kick in and Jonathan would leave these things behind him, so they might as well make the most of his short childhood while it lasted.

Holly had seen an old fisherman in his salt-bleached blue canvas smock and waterproof dungarees. He was just about to turn off the seafront when she managed to catch his eye and approach him.

"Hi there," she greeted the weather-beaten man in hushed tones. "We're new in town and we were hoping that you might be able to help us."

The old man looked the three of them up and down and then, quite out of the blue, he nodded to the lane. "Follow me," he requested. They walked some way along the old cobbled lane and then, looking furtively around, the old man quickly directed them down a narrow alleyway between some shops. They turned a corner, out of sight of the lane and the old man stopped in front of a tatty, unmarked door. There was a small glass lens set into the door about eye height and Holly presumed that this was so that the occupant could see who was at the door. The old man knocked three times in quick succession; then a further three times more slowly, and finished off with another three raps in quick succession.

"It's an old Moorish code," he quietly confided as they patiently waited for an answer. A minute or two later, the door opened, they were ushered inside and the door was again

promptly locked and bolted.

Safely inside the building, they could relax and the old sailor introduced himself as Jack Morgan.

"Down here, young'uns," old Jack invited them and they descended a spiral staircase made of finely wrought, scrolled iron and thick wooden planks.

"Those timbers came off a very old ship, *The Mary Lou*", Jack proudly informed them. "We tries out best to keep the old crafts alive, but it's getting harder as the years go by," he lamented.

"Yes, I can imagine," Holly nodded.

At the bottom of the spiral staircase, when they entered a bar, it was like stepping into a bygone age. The front and top of the bar were made of the finest hardwood and still highly polished despite years of use, and here and there, old nets, crab pots and other fishing paraphernalia was used to decorate the room. There were one or two prize fish hanging on the wall, too, and they must have been stuffed and preserved, for they still looked as alive as the day they were caught.

"Not many big fish like that about, these days," old Jack lamented. "Sea's just about fished out. You know, when I was a nipper, the harbour would be packed with trawlers and herring boats, but now there's just a handful of boats and skippers left. A crying shame it is, a crying shame."

They went to stand at the bar and waited for old Jack to catch the eye of the bartender and place an order and they each had a pint of the landlord's best ale. Will offered to pay, but old Jack would have none of it. "No, no. That's what friends are for," he smiled. "Unless of course you fancy buying a second round?"

"You're on," Will beamed back.

"Now, I should warn you, young'uns," Jack told them. "Not only is this ale alcofrolic, it's also a rather strong brew, so pace yourself. The last thing we want is you staggering around up topside and getting yourselves arrested."

Jack found them a cosy table in a corner of the bar and he fished in his pocket and produced an old brier pipe and a pouch of tobacco, spending some time filling the bowl of the pipe. "If you'll excuse me for a minute or two, I need to step out into the back yard for some fresh air, otherwise the baccie will make our

clothes smell. If the pohlees get a whiff of it, we'll be in for it."

When the man said "pohlees", he was probably referring to the Enforcers. Like alcohol, the use of tobacco had been prohibited long ago, while Holly was still a young child.

Soon enough, old Jack was back, leaving a plume of grey-blue tobacco smoke in his wake.

"You can get hold of the stuff for a price if you know where to look and who to ask," the old man explained to them, seeing Holly's interest. "I'm damned if them Hive-minded baboons are going to take away a working man's simple pleasures. 'Course before we leave we'd best pick up a packet of strong mints from the bar, to help disguise the smell of the beer and baccie."

The old man had a few sips of his beer, then turned to them. "Right then, young'uns. You said you were looking for help. What can I do for you? I can't promise anything, mind, but there's no harm in asking. I won't take offence if you ask, and please don't you take offence if I have to say no."

Rowan spoke up. "We were told that there's land out to the east of here," he began and straight away old Jack's interest was piqued.

Rowan brought out the map and showed it to the man. Old Jack felt in his pocket, brought out a pair of reading glasses and examined the map more closely.

"Well that 'W' is Widdensborough," Jack pointed out. "That's quite clear. Yes, without a shadow of a doubt."

Holly nodded. "Yes, that's what we thought, and it's the reason we're here."

"So what's this other land?" Jack wanted to know. "If the map's anything like to scale, I'd say it must be fifty miles off the coast."

"We're reliably informed that the 'A' stands for Arcadia or Arcady," Holly informed the old man.

"Well I never did," the old man exclaimed, taking off his reading glasses and looking her in the eye. "Why I remember my old grandma telling me about a place called Arcadia. Over the sea it was, she says. I've been at sea since I was fourteen and, as you can tell, I'm getting on a bit now. But I must say that in all that time, I've never once heard of anyone going there or coming back."

"Well, I never," he said again, handing the map back to Rowan.

Then: "But of course we've never gone more than three or four miles out, you see, not since them Hive baboons took over, and that's a long while back. They won't let us stray that far. So for all I know, there really may be a place there called Arcadia. Even if it's not called Arcadia, I can't believe for one minute that there's just sea out there like they keep telling us. It stands to reason there must be more land."

"To be honest, Jack, we don't particularly care what they call the place as long as it's free of the Hive," Holly told the man. "I'm growing thoroughly sick and tired of the Hive Mentality and with being on the run from the Enforcers – the pohlees, as you call them – and I'm hoping and praying that we can find someone willing to take us there to find out."

"We have money and we're more than willing to pay whatever it costs," Will added, flashing the temporary credit card.

As an added bonus, the card wasn't even charged with their own money: one of Will's contacts had just done what the banks did when they needed funds, which was type in a suitably large number of imaginary credits at a terminal and swipe the card through the machine. That was the beauty of the temporary cards: the credits were actually stored in the card, and there was no account involved. And it also showed the level of stupidity of the Bankers, who were so lax that they could let this travesty happen. Well, more fool them, that's all she could say.

Old Jack rose to his feet. "Alright, let's get another round in. Then give me a minute or two", the man suggested. "I'll have a talk with one of the other skippers. His boat's a bit bigger than mine and it'll fare better offshore. And if he's willing and heaven's willing, I'll bring him across to have a proper chin wag and sort out the details."

As the saying had it, even miracles have details, Holly mused.

A few minutes later, old Jack returned, bringing the other skipper with him. The man was far younger, but almost as weather-worn as old Jack and he was built like the side of a bus. He didn't give his name and didn't ask to be introduced, which – given the dangers involved – was a prudent course of action, and

he wanted to hear what they themselves had to say about the proposed voyage, so Rowan explained what little they knew, or hoped for. Though the man wasn't as easy going or amiable as old Jack, by the time Rowan had finished his spiel, he seemed satisfied enough.

"Well, you'll be paying whether you find land or not," the man shrugged, "so, given a few necessary precautions, I'm willing to give it a go. Of course, I'd prefer not to have to bring you back, otherwise we'll have to get the timing right so that you're not seen leaving the boat.

"I agree with friend Jack here. The land looks like it's about fifty miles off the coast, and I'm willing to go a few miles further if needs be, but if we still haven't found it, then we'll have to turn back. I figure I can get about eight knots out of the boat, but we'll pick a more conservative speed and bank on sixty miles, just to be on the safe side. So let's say that the trip could take us eight and a half hours."

All they could do was nod and take the man's word for it. "Sure, you're the expert," Holly nodded.

"Okay then. Looking at the tide tables, the best time to set sail would be no later than four in the morning and since that is such an early start, we'll get you on board later tonight when it's dark and the harbour's quiet, and you can sleep down below. When we're away from the coast, you can come up and stretch your legs, but be sure to wrap up warmly.

"If there's land there, we should reach it by lunchtime tomorrow."

The skipper looked at his watch and rose to his feet. "Anyhow, meet me at the boat sharp on ten o'clock. The boat will be at this end of the quay. It's white with a red stripe the full length of the hull and the name's *Fishy Business*."

The man shrugged apologetically. "I know, she was my old man's boat and I didn't choose the name. Anyhow, the main thing is, she's still seaworthy."

"Oh, first things first, it might help if you paid me up front. Its nothing personal, like, but I've been let down on charters before," the skipper smiled, tapping himself on the side of the head to jog his memory. "Hello, is there anybody in there?"

He pulled a handheld card reader from his pocket, tapped at

the keypad and placed it on the table and Will went into his pocket, inserted the card and followed the on-screen instructions. Shortly afterwards, the machine pinged and printed two paper receipts and Will retrieved the card. He was going to take one of the receipts but the skipper took them instead, tore them into shreds and tossed the bits on the nearby fire. “Sorry, can’t be too careful,” he apologized. “What the pohlees don’t know, the heart doesn’t grieve, as my dear old dad used to say.”

That done, the man turned to leave. “Anyhow, I must dash. See you later.”

They managed to find the boat soon enough that night and the skipper was there waiting to hurry them on board and safely down below, out of sight. There were only two narrow bunks down there and Will, Rowan and John very gallantly let her and Jonathan have the upper bunk. Then they spent a minute or two arguing that the other person deserved the second bunk until she had the good sense to suggest that the three of them either slept together sitting sideways on the bunk or else they took it in turns, and they quickly settled on the latter option.

With all the excitement, none of them slept well that night and in any case a couple of other crew members had come on board by now and they were busy in the galley brewing coffee and cooking a fry up before it was time to cast off. Seeing them still awake, one of the guys asked if they could go a coffee, and in the end all seven of them were down there tucking into a three A.M. feast while the skipper sat up top in the cabin. With so many down below, it became a little hot and sweaty and the portholes steamed up, but Holly’s mind was on other things and she could live with that for a while.

Finally, at just coming up to four o’clock, they were underway. It was pretty easy going while they were inshore but as they got further and further out to sea, out of the shelter of the town’s south bay, the boat began to pitch and roll with increasing intensity. Holly managed to keep her food down, but poor little Jonathan looked distinctly green around the gills and Holly thought it best if she went to ask advice of one of the crew. He came down into the galley, went into the first aid cabinet and produced a brown bottle and a dessert spoon. He had all five of them take two full measures of some vile green concoction before

returning to the cabin and fortunately they all managed to keep their food down.

Eventually nodding off and sleeping well into the morning, after which one of the crew made them another fry up for breakfast, they didn't emerge on deck until one of the crew excitedly called down below to say that the skipper had spotted land. They didn't need a second prompting and they raced up on deck to see for themselves, without a trace of the seasickness remaining.

"Well, bless your heart, you were right," the skipper nodded, handing Will a pair of binoculars, and they took turns to peer through them. "Who'd have thought it, eh?"

"Big enough place, too," the skipper added. "If it's an island, I reckon it must be thirty miles across and heaven knows how deep. Well, I certainly hope that you find what you wanted there."

As they drew closer, Will pointed something out to the skipper and the man had a look. "Looks like a quay," he nodded, and he turned the the wheel and headed toward it.

"Not just a quay," one of the crew said. "I can see two boats there and twenty or more houses."

The skipper turned to Holly. "If we hadn't found any signs of habitation here, I was going to suggest that I could wait a few hours, so that you had time to decide whether you wanted to stay there or not. But since it looks civilized, I'll see if I can tie up on the quay. I'll wait an hour and you can either return with us or stay, depending on whether you find the natives friendly or hostile. It's your choice. But if you're not back in an hour, then I'll cast off."

Holly nodded. "Okay, that seems fair enough, Skipper. Thanks a lot, you don't know how much this means to us, to finally get away from the Hive."

The skipper turned and smiled at her. "Oh, you know, I was young once myself and I think I can guess.

"Okay lads, we're getting close now. Let's have you out on deck. Keep a sharp lookout: I don't want to prang the boat, because it's a helluva long way to paddle back home and I'm not sure that the insurance will cover this trip."

17. The Last Chance

One of the crew slung several old rubber tyres over the side of the boat and as they gently bumped up against the quay, two of the crewmen clambered up a rusty metal ladder and tied the boat up fore and aft, then lowered the gang plank so that Holly, Rowan, Will, John and Jonathan could safely step ashore. They waved to the skipper and eagerly headed along the old stone quay, then up a steep cobbled street toward the houses to get out of the brisk offshore wind and find a place to rest.

Spotting what looked like an inn not far from the tiny harbour, Holly took hold of little Jonathan's hand and they hurried to get inside out of the chilly sea air. *The Last Chance* was a wonderfully quaint old inn with blackened wooden beams and low doorways. The people must have been smaller when the inn was first built and even she had to duck her head to avoid banging it on the top of the doorway on the way in.

"Hello," Holly called excitedly, spotting the lovely, flickering log fire in one corner and dashing up to the counter. Now this was a real home away from home.

"Yes, my love, what would you like?" asked the old lady who was serving at the bar. She wore an old-fashioned dark blue dress down to her ankles and her long grey hair was combed back and held in a bun behind her head by a fine net and hairgrips.

"Well, we'll order in a moment, but first of all, I'm bursting to know one thing. Is this Arcadia?"

The old lady raised her eyebrows. "Why, it's been a few years since it's been called that, my dear, and of course life has changed a lot since then."

Holly was cock-a-hoop. "Oh wow!" Her arm around Jonathan's shoulder, she surveyed the bar. "Then we'll have a glass of lemonade for my son here and four pints of your strongest beer, please."

"You'll want the Number Three, then," the old lady smiled. "There we are, little one," she smiled, finding a safe plastic beaker, pouring out a lemonade for Jonathan and handing it over. Three huge gulps later and it was half gone.

Then the old lady reached under the bar to fetch four real glasses and worked the old hand pump. Gosh, this was getting better and better.

"Are you planning on staying here long?" the old lady enquired as she handed over the first of the beers.

"Well, we were hoping that we might settle down here permanently," Holly chirped up as she passed the beer to Will.

"Oh, that is good. People soon settle in here, my dear," the old lady smiled, passing the second pint to Rowan and working on the third.

When the four of them had received their drinks, they clinked their glasses. "Cheers," they toasted one-another in unison. "Your good health."

Will was the first to notice and he whispered to Holly. "Is it just me or is this beer alcohol free?"

Holly shrugged and went back to her drink. "Will, I'll let you know after I've downed one or two more pints," she laughed.

"Oh yes, people soon settle in here," the lady repeated. And then she paused and shrugged her shoulders. "And if they don't, *well* ..."

"Well?" Rowan prompted.

"Well if they don't, our love, then we have our menfolk feed them to the fishes," the woman replied matter-of-factly as she stood there polishing glasses. "You'll find we're plain and simple folk in these parts and we don't believe in mollycoddling."

Rowan could feel a terrible lump rising in his throat and he and Holly exchanged horrified glances. And for the first time as they scanned around the room, they noticed that all eyes were upon them as they stood there at the bar.

"Anyhow," the old lady continued unabashed, "we expect you'll be wanting rooms for the next few nights, until we can arrange something more suitable for you. We only have single rooms, you understand, so there'll be no how's your father."

"It's alright, Mummy," Jonathan chirped up as he finished his lemonade and returned his beaker to the bar. "We won't hurt you as long as you do as you're told."

What was that Holly had said about things going pear-shaped?

18. The last stand

Instinctively, Rowan's hand went to his jacket pocket, ready to slip the safety catch off his disrupter and prime it. He was shocked to find the weapon gone.

"Are you looking for this?" Jonathan enquired, bringing the gun out of his own pocket and waving it threateningly in Rowan's direction. The red light was flashing, which meant that the gun was already armed.

"Hey, that's not a toy, you know," Rowan replied nervously, edging closer.

Just then, Will crept up behind the lad and snatched the disrupter from his hand. Jonathan must have had his finger on the trigger, because a bright blue bolt shot from the muzzle, whistled past Rowan's left shoulder and exploded in a shower of sparks on the far wall of the bar.

Will tossed the gun in Rowan's direction. He caught it in mid air and swung round on the locals who by now had risen from their seats and were warily advancing on the group.

Will snatched Jonathan up in his arms and Rowan ushered the others toward the door, firing a shot into the ceiling and showering the bar in loose plaster. "Armed Enforcer!" he bellowed. "Stay where you are or I'll shoot!"

That was a lie, of course, but it threw the locals into a state of confusion, hopefully long enough to allow them to make their getaway; and they continued to back away toward the door.

Jonathan was giving his Uncle Will a helluva time; kicking and screaming and trying to break free, but the man had tight hold of him.

Finally they were out through the door.

"Make for the boat!" Rowan yelled as the locals began to crowd through the door. He could see now that at least one of them was armed. He had the breech of a shotgun open and he was rummaging in his pocket for a couple of cartridges.

Just then, Jonathan bit Will on the hand and he yelled out and involuntarily dropped Jonathan. In an instant, the lad was free.

"We hate you, we hate you, we hate you!" the lad screamed

at Rowan before turning away, and he dashed back to the inn.

That long dreaded, unthinkable possibility had finally happened.

Holly was horrified and overwrought. “Jonathan!” she screamed; then she spun round and faced Rowan. “Rowan, you have to do something.”

Rowan caught sight of the man as he closed the breach of the shotgun and he fell to his knee and fired, catching the man full in the chest and bowling him over. As the shotgun hit the cobbles, it went off and shot across the street with the recoil, but thankfully nobody was hurt.

“Jonathan, please come here!” Holly called out and she held her arms out beseechingly. “Jonathan!”

“No, we won’t! We like it here and we don’t want to go anywhere with you!” he yelled back, and the lad turned away to bury his head in the old lady’s long skirt.

Holly looked beseechingly to Rowan and then she shook her head sadly. “Oh Rowan, I’m his mother,” she sighed. “If Jonathan wants to stay here, then that is what I must do.”

Holly had just begun to walk toward the locals when Will caught hold of her by the arm. “No, Holly,” he replied sternly. “There’s nothing that you can do for the lad now.” He had to forcibly drag Holly off and headed back down the cobbled street toward the quayside while Rowan covered them. Shots rang out and whistled past their heads and Rowan reluctantly returned fire.

He could see now that the disrupter was almost on empty, and that he might just about be able to squeeze out another three shots before it packed in and began the slow automatic emergency recharge.

He turned away. “Run for your lives!” he called out, and they pelted down the cobbled street and onto the old stone quay.

The skipper was up on deck and watching them through his binoculars, alerted by the gunfire, and as they approached the boat Rowan called out. “Get ready to cast off!”

Only then did he see that the boat had already cast off and see the plume of blue smoke emerge from the exhaust as the skipper fired up the diesel engine.

Already he was pulling away from the quay.

“No, no! Wait!” they all cried as they stood there and

watched the old boat pull away from the quay. “Please! For pity’s sake, come back. You have to take us with you!”

But the skipper paid them no heed. He turned away and swung the wheel to point the old trawler toward the sea.

Holly dropped to her knees, her head buried in her hands, and Rowan turned back toward the locals who had by now reached the quay.

He fired off two more shots, by chance taking out three of the locals with a ricochet; then the amber light started flashing, signalling that the weapon was empty.

And still the locals were steadily advancing on them.

Rowan turned away. He went over to Holly and fell to his knees beside her, to give her a last hug. What else could he do in a moment like this?

“Do you remember the promise you made?” Holly asked him, brushing her hair back and wiping the tears from her eyes.

Rowan remembered all too well.

“Let me hear you say it,” she insisted, beads of perspiration forming on her forehead.

Rowan gulped deeply. “You said that if there was no way out, that you would rather die than be taken by the Hive,” he confirmed.

Holly clutched tight hold of his hand. “Then do it, Rowan. Do it now, and for pity’s sake, be quick about it.”

Rowan just sat there, his head buried in his hand.

“You promised me, Rowan,” Holly pleaded, snatching his hand away and forcing him to look her in the eye. “You mustn’t go back on your word. Don’t worry, beloved, we’ll meet again some day when this is all over. With a love like ours, I know we will. Not even death can keep us apart.”

There were tears in Rowan’s eyes now. “Please forgive me, Holly,” he cried, as he reached out his large hands to her slender neck.

19. In the nick of time

Just then, Will spotted a rope looped over one of the wooden pilings at the edge of the quay.

He dashed across and peered over the edge.

“This way!” he bellowed and as the others turned their heads, he was already astride the rusty metal ladder and making his descent.

The others needed no further encouragement and they dashed across to see what he’d found.

Down below there was a small rowing boat and the oars were still in the bottom of the boat.

When Will reached the bottom of the ladder, with the others hot on his tail, he caught hold of the loose rope and pulled the boat close to the ladder. Then, clambering aboard the boat, he heaved on the rope to hold it in place whilst the others jumped in.

Will quickly untied the rope and used one of the oars to push them away from the edge of the quay, then he and John hooked the oars over the U-shaped rowlocks and they pulled with all their might while Holly, though still thoroughly dazed, manned the tiller at the back.

More shots rang out now and they involuntarily ducked, but thankfully the locals were not expert shots; and though their progress was slow, they were finally out of range.

There was no way that they could make it back to the east coast, so after some deliberation, they decided that they’d follow the coast south until they could find somewhere out of the way, a beach maybe, where they could haul up the boat and rest. And after that, heavenly only knew where they’d go or what they’d do or what cruel fate might lay in store for them.

“Cheer up,” Rowan consoled Holly, reaching over to tenderly stroke her arm. “We’re free and we’re going to survive this, and we’re going to emerge from the other end all the stronger.”

Holly was still beside herself with grief, however, and if she heard him, then it probably barely registered in her consciousness; though she still might feel it deep down inside.

“I know that it’s going to take more than an elastic plaster to

fix things, Rowan, but don't worry unduly," Will advised, holding his oar in the air and momentarily taking a breather from rowing, his shirt drenched in sweat from the tension and the exertion. Will's hand was still red and covered in blood from Jonathan's vicious bite. "You know, love and time are great healers and we have all the love and time in the world."

"Excuse me," John butted in. "Now, I don't want to alarm you folk, but I think we're sinking."

It was then that Rowan noticed the water beginning to accumulate in the bottom of the boat. One of the shots that had been fired must have hit the hull below the waterline. And there wasn't even a stirrup pump on board to help them bail out.

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End of Part 1
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Part 2: Homecoming

Quatrain #147

The homecoming of the soul is a great affair of joy and sweetness
but is also characterised by a feeling of surrender and meekness.
After having gone astray through ignorance into the world of pain and sorrow
it returns back home like a prodigal son with joy and thought for the morrow.

~ George Krokos.

20. Mobbed by Seagulls

Special Investigator Morrison stood not far from the harbour at Widdensborough, awaiting the imminent arrival of uniform as they collectively termed the men. He was currently preoccupied, though, doing his level best to defend himself against the concerted efforts of two very determined, brazen and shameless seagulls which were mobbing him and trying to scatter his chips. They'd have the fish itself if they only could. A sign tacked to the nearby kiosk read, in large day-glow lettering above the grey outline of a bird with a chip in its mouth and a diagonal red line drawn through it, "Absolutely No Refunds."

A stocky man with receding black hair now mixed with strands of grey – which he blamed on one of his earlier bosses, "Horn-rimmed Harry", an officious meddler – he had been in the Force all his adult life and he was nearing retirement.

He'd received his own orders not from his immediate boss but from Detective Chief Superintendent Mullins, no less. It was only natural that Morrison's own boss, Parker, would have kept the Super informed about Kingsley's covert operation. Presumably he was the one who had okayed the plan in the first place. But these latest orders had come from higher up. Far higher up. Indeed from the very apex of the food chain, as the Super had confided in Parker and she, in turn, in Morrison. It was an important operation, of course, but he couldn't quite figure out why it merited this level of oversight and involvement.

The last he'd heard from Kingsley was when his party had been pulled over by an Enforcer travelling up north, and for a time they'd lost track of him. Later questioning had revealed that there had been a woman and child with them, and though the officer couldn't confirm their identities, Morrison was pretty sure that it must have been Potter and her brat. Then they lost track of them. Kingsley's implant must have malfunctioned or been removed, because there was no trace of their whereabouts in the system since then.

But now, the authorities had been informed that a group of five: three men, a woman, and a child had been reported at an inn,

The Last Chance. The adults had unfortunately evaded capture, but the young boy who was with them – Jonathan Potter – had apparently defected and was in safe keeping. When he'd arrived, Morrison had asked around about this inn, expecting to find it in Widdensborough, to no avail. When he was on the phone briefing his boss Parker, however, it turned out that the inn was actually on Luntis, which he was told was an island around sixty miles east, off the coast of Widdensborough. He'd consulted the map in his car, but there was nothing there: just open sea. Nevertheless, Parker was adamant that's where the island was situated, though it was not to be found on official maps, at least not those accessible with his lowly security clearance – which was another thing he needed to sort out, but that could keep for another day.

And there, he was reliably informed, he would find the inn and the boy, who was to be brought in for interrogation. If the boy was as cooperative as Parker had been led to believe, then they would get a trove of valuable information out of him; perhaps some even beneath his conscious awareness. The Shrinks were adept at techniques to uncover such buried, hidden information. Since the most reliable and resourceful Shrinks were based at HQ in the capital, however, that's where the boy would have to be taken once he was in custody.

As for the others, Parker had already dispatched a platoon of uniformed Enforcers who would be tasked with scouring the island and rounding up the others. And that's who Morrison was waiting for at that moment, having already chartered a couple of the local fishing boats to ferry him and the uniform to the island. Of course, the Diss must have used one of the boats themselves in order to get to the island, but every skipper he'd spoken to had merely shaken their head when questioned, and pleaded ignorance, or scoffed at the idea. It probably didn't help that he was one of "them there city slickers" as they were known. The existence of any land mass east of Widdensborough was news to even the most weathered seafarer, and the cause of much merriment at his expense. He was no rookie himself though, and suitably thick skinned, so he took it all in his stride.

These people up north, away from the capital and provincial cities, weren't Dissident, but they weren't particularly Hive-Minded either. He'd tried greasing their palms, and they readily

took his credits, but they told him little he didn’t already know or couldn’t have worked out for himself.

21. Ahead of the Game

In *The Last Chance* inn on the Isle of Luntis sixty miles away as the heron flew, “Auntie Mai” and “Uncle Sam” were mollycoddling little Jonathan. Well, Mai was; Samuel was otherwise engaged in a nearby armchair re-reading last month’s news, while young Helen served the regulars. Jonathan was sitting at a writing bureau in their private quarters behind the bar and stuffing his guts with home-made fish cakes and chips, followed by home-baked cake, and liberally washed down with lemonade. If he was really good, there was the promise of sherry trifle for afters. And they kept milk of magnesia in the pantry, should he over-face himself and need relief from indigestion. Of course, it also had a laxative effect that they could have done without, but it was all they had to-hand. It had been over thirty years since they’d had Helen, and maybe things had moved on since then, at least on the mainland if not the island, and they could only do the best they could under the circumstances.

Uncle Sam had been trying to get Jonathan to talk about the kind of life he’d been leading, and about his Dissident parents, but Jonathan had other ideas and, for all his tender age, he was ahead of the game: in return for his new family’s indulgence, he would write about these things, though in rather spindly, spidery writing, and especially draw them using some coloured crayons that one of the other women had kindly managed to rustle-up. Maybe on the mainland they’d have newfangled gizmos to record what Jonathan had to say, but not on the island. Of course, they had the wireless set (radio) to pick up the official channels and listen to all the old hymns like *Hive of Plenty*, but no television service. So again they could only do the best they could.

Mai cast her mind back to the time she’d first come to the island, more years back than she cared to think, and she vaguely remembered how different it had been living on an island, sixty miles away from the bustling streets and the nearest real shops, apart from the local store, which carried only essentials and monthly orders. The move hadn’t been easy at all, neither for her nor for Samuel, but they’d got by, and, growing up in a household

that was long used to having to “make do and mend”, they’d gradually got used to their new life.

And, of course, the Powers That Be allowed them a little freedom on the island, and paid the community a small subsidy, in return for playing their part in the Agreement. No doubt they’d receive a bonus for the lad, and for the rest of them when they were eventually caught. They’d be sending their people over, no doubt, in the coming days, if the good weather held, along with the month’s supplies. And if the weather turned, maybe the following month. One month, two, three: you never could guarantee when the next shipment, or people, would arrive.

22. The Vizier

Meanwhile, over 250 miles south of Widdensborough, in the capital, Wormston, the Queen's Vizier (or Wormtongue as one of the Dissidents who knew her pre-Hive literature had dubbed him) was fuming, and he made no attempt to hide his discontent from the minions and sycophants that surrounded him and attended to his every whim and every word. He'd read excellent reports on Operation Mincemeat and about the Kingsley fellow at the heart of it. And he'd held high hopes for its eventual success, as Kingsley slowly but surely wormed his way into the very heart of the conspiratorial Dissident organisation, which would ultimately lead him to the capital itself. There were Dissident operatives everywhere. Perhaps even here, very close to the seat of power. And, by hook or by crook, they must be rooted out and terminated with the utmost prejudice.

And now? So much time and effort had been wasted. Shredded beyond retrieval now that that evil shit, Kingsley, had succumbed to the ever-seductive lure of the Diss. Most likely because of that Potter woman and his despicable inability to keep his one-eyed trouser snake securely zipped up in his pants. But that was but the tip of the iceberg: what had lain beneath the water was ten times, a hundred times, a thousand times, more valuable to them, if only he had continued and succeeded in his work. That was the real and tragic cost of this botched operation.

Wormston slammed his fist down on the desk, scattered papers with a sweep of his right arm, and sank back in his padded leather chair. And he sighed. A long, deep, guttural sigh.

He drew in a deep breath, and he let it out slowly. There was only one upside of this. Well, perhaps two. The first was the boy. Potter's boy, whatever his name was. More to the point: what that boy knew. And, most likely, things he didn't even know that he knew. Deep down inside.

And the second: that once they caught Kingsley – and it was a matter of *when*, rather than *if* – and once he had been "reconditioned", perhaps they could use him again? Facilitate his escape and allow him to continue his mission, now armed with an

even more plausible backstory as an intrepid fugitive, and worm his way even deeper into the Dissidents upper echelons. As for the Queen, she would be eternally grateful to her Grand Vizier and amply reward him.

And again, perhaps the boy and his mother might prove to be of key importance in the greater scheme of things. Leverage, if nothing else.

Wormston sat up straight in his chair, galvanised by these thoughts, and gleefully rubbed his hands together. “Yes!” he cried out, rather pleased with himself. “Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!”

And now? He must speak to Her Majesty that very morning, and warn her, in no uncertain terms, of the grave and growing threat of Dissidence operating within the very halls of power, and impress upon her the urgency of his work in counter-insurgency. She would see – and above all feel – and take onboard the inspired wisdom of his words. All hail the Hive Mind!

And his Great Mind, too, of course. That goes without saying. Though, truth be told, he did so like to say it and have it said. Wormston my boy, things are looking up in the world!

23. The Queen

At last, Her vizier's incessant droning ceased. He'd given Her much to consider; too much to really take in in such a short space of time. But heavens, did that man love the sound of his own voice, at times to the point of insolence. Not that any of Her subjects was perfect, by any means. She was surrounded by fools and credulous sycophants.

The Queen scratched Her chin thoughtfully. She was about to nod and thank Wormston, but had second thoughts.

"Let me down again, Wormston," She replied, drawing in a deep breath, "and it will be more than mere pride that you lose."

Again the woman paused for dramatic effect, as was the Royal Prerogative. And she drew a hand slowly and forcefully across her throat, leaving not the slightest room for misinterpretation in his mind. "It will cost you your head."

He stifled his immediate and unscripted response, and sucked in his breath. "Of course, Your Majesty. We quite understand. And you may trust us. We won't let you down."

What he would have loved to have said, was "If we go down, you go down, Your Majesty. We've already seen to that," but all he could do, when she dismissed him with a casual wave of her hand, was console his wounded pride, bow his way out of her presence, and quietly fume inside.

"And as for trust, Wormston," She bellowed across the throne room as he retreated with his tail between his legs like a chastised dog, for all to hear quite plainly, including the lowly attendants and servants. "I don't trust you as far I could throw you." Use of the word "I" was another Royal Prerogative, and she used it to effect.

But for now, at least, no doubt believing in the threats about which he'd warned her, the woman had little option other than to allow him to continue his work.

24. Bailing Out

It wasn't waning strength that brought an end to their escape, but sheer necessity. John Coles and Holly Potter had been bailing out the sinking boat as fast as they could, Rowan having by now taken over one of the oars from the more slightly-built John; Holly using one of her long boots, John the other, and she occasionally had to break off to work the rudder. But it was a hopeless task, as they knew full well, and it was only a matter of time before they either had to abandon the boat and swim to shore, or beach the boat as best they could. At least they were well out of sight now and well beyond pursuit – immediate pursuit, at least – and it would be dark in a matter of hours. If for no other reason, they should head for the shore before the sun went down.

They rowed for just a little longer, beyond a slight promontory and then turned the rudder and headed for the shore, riding lower and lower in the water. Kingsley was glad to see a spot of beach between the first promontory and the next, where sand had managed to gather and, pointing it out, they headed for that.

Finally they bottomed out in the shallow water and they all hopped out and paddled ashore. Will and Rowan had done most of the hard work getting there, so John and Holly dragged the boat up onto the sand, as best they could. Then they all sat down for a few minutes to get their breath and take stock of the situation, as best they could.

At length, Holly was on her feet and looking around. She encouraged the others to drag the boat up the shore and in amongst some thick bushes a little further inland, out of sight of prying eyes. Thinking ahead, she dashed up the beach, snapped off a long, leafy stem, dashed back down to the water's edge and began to painstakingly erase the deep furrow that the boat's keel had made in the sand, and their footsteps to either side of it.

"What now, Skipper?" her brother, Will wanted to know, addressing her.

She thought for a moment and peered into the dense tree and

ground cover. “I think we should make a mental note of where we are, and then head inland a little until we find a clearing, or somewhere we can easily make a clearing.”

“And set up camp?”

“As best we can,” she nodded. “Given that all we have is what we’re wearing and carrying on our backs.”

“We’re hardly equipped for survival in the wild,” John noted, with a less than enthusiastic expression on his tired, sweaty face.

“We’ll get to that later,” Holly assured him. “So we’ll take things one step at a time. Starting with baby steps. We find a site in which to camp, and we pool all the food we have with us, and calculate how much we dare eat and how long it will last. And maybe we’ll need something soft to lay on while we sleep.”

“Will we need a fire? Dare we even light a fire?” John wanted to know.

She shrugged. “We can collect wood on the way, just in case, and by evening we’ll have a better idea of how cold it might be. And if possible, maybe we should save the wood for cooking.”

“Assuming we can catch anything,” John grumbled.

“Oh ye of little faith!” she laughed, deliberately refraining from rising to the bait and allowing tempers to flare. That was the last thing they needed right now. She was already walking the length of the beach, picking up bits of driftwood, and the others followed suit. To his credit, John had already seen a couple of large logs and he and Rowan went off to pick them up.

They headed inland for some time, weaving their way between mature trees and at times having difficulty negotiating a passage through dense and sometimes prickly undergrowth.

“Well, we certainly won’t starve for lack of berries,” Rowan observed, snatching up a juicy red berry and popping it in her mouth when she’d caught up with the others. Will and John were some way ahead.

“Mmm, that tastes so good,” she cooed in reply. Then: “Hey, you guys. Slow the pace and stay in sight, please. We don’t want anyone getting lost.”

“Your wish is our command, Oh Masterful One!” Will called back. Brothers could get away with such backchat; others, not so much.

“Woo-hoo!” John cried, and turning to the others, he

beckoned them on.

Ahead of them now, they could see an area that looked like it had been cleared of larger, more mature trees at some point, and here and there were the tumbled ruins of what looked like old, perhaps even ancient, stone ruins. Certainly, the area was clear enough to establish a camp, and some of the fallen masonry would serve as somewhere to sit. Maybe even shelter from the elements, later.

"You know what," Rowan began.

"No, I don't know what," Holly teased him as they entered the clearing and scanned the area. "What?"

"I was thinking that these ruins look pretty ancient. Maybe this is all that's left of Arcadia."

"Arcadia was a mountainous region in the central Peloponnese of ancient Greece, named after the mythological figure Arcas, and was considered the home of the gods Hermes and Pan in Greek mythology," John corrected him. He might not look it, let alone act like it at times, but he was the studious type.

But Peloponnese, Greece? The Old World was long dead and buried, and this was all Greek to her. Hah! Maybe that's where that old phrase came from.

"You know what," Holly laughed. "From now on, we'll address you as Prof."

°It was sad, though, that so much history had been suppressed or simply lost and forgotten. Nobody seemed to know how the Change had come about. Few even knew that there *had* been a Change. And if they did knew, there were still fewer among them now who would have cared. They just lived out their lives, oblivious that anything had happened at all.

°But they hadn't been able to erase all memory or all trace of the Old. It had been an imperfect plan and there were strange anomalies.°

Holly pulled herself together and looked around, dismissing these bizarre and intrusive thoughts. Whatever had made her think such things?

°It runs in the family,° an inner voice told her.

"I'm sorry, what were you saying?" she asked.

Rowan shrugged. "Well, maybe this is the Arcadia of the West, named in honour of the original?"

John nodded. “Could be. Maybe the people who lived here were romantics?”

“Speaking of which,” Holly grinned, as she playfully ran her her hand up the back of Rowan’s trouser leg and patted his behind.

“Ha! hold my brain; be still my beating heart”, John laughed.

“Who said that?” Holly wanted to know.

“It’s from William Mountfort’s play Zelmane, from the early 1700s of the Christian era. 1705, if I’m not mistaken,” he reliably informed her. “I’m not much of a fighter, and I have two left hands, so that’s my quirky little contribution to the Resistance.”

“I’m doubly impressed,” she replied. “Not least by your encyclopaedic knowledge. You’re a natural Rememberer, and we sorely need that in this day and age.”

“I have a filmatic memory,” John admitted. “And before you congratulate me a third time, I should point out that it’s a bane as well as a boon.”

She tilted her head to one side and looked at him askance, though out of curiosity rather than suspicion. “Why’s that?”

John sighed a deep sigh. “Because I’m compelled to remember, in detail – often in stereo and vivid technicolour – every damn embarrassing event in my life since early childhood. And I place particular emphasis on the words ‘every’, ‘damn’, and ‘embarrassing’.”

“Don’t be overly critical of yourself, or embarrassed, John,” she smiled back. Then she abruptly changed the subject. “Okay, guys: let’s make camp here.”

“Maybe we should have a vote, Sis’,” Will proposed.

She nodded. “Quite right, too. We should begin as we mean to go on. Okay, so John proposes that we set up camp here. For the time being, at least. Do we have a seconder?”

“Seconded,” said John, thrusting his hand in the air.

“Okay, guys, so everyone in favour say ‘Aye!’”

They sounded off, to which she added her own voice.

“And those against the motion, say ‘Nay!’”

Silence.

“Okay, the ayes definitely have it, so there’s no need for a manual count of hands. I declare that the motion is adopted. So let’s get to work.”

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Rowan was awakened by the sound of music. Shocked to find himself in strange surroundings, he leapt to his feet, muscles taut, and stance defensive. The momentary fear subsiding, he drew a deep breath and scanned the area.

The ground beneath them was covered in long, lush grass, and they'd all slept huddled close together, laid on blankets and still wearing layers of clothing and their coats, but his back was stiff and he felt the sharp stabs of pins and needles in his right leg.

The others were up already, sitting on the makeshift seating, since the grass was damp with early-morning dew. And he noticed that he was damp, too, especially the back of his trousers which were meant to be water resistant, if not waterproof, but clearly weren't that, either. And, to crown it all, he was feeling decidedly hungry, and they hadn't as yet checked what food they had with them: Holly had just passed a few sandwiches around, and a large bottle of fizzy orange before they settled down for the night.

Rowan saw what was going on now. Will had a small, rectangular, red and black object in his hands – a radio – and they were sitting there listening to it. It couldn't be one of the official channels, though, because of the music. It was clearly an old song, but he was unfamiliar with it.

"Hey, you guys," he said. Grabbing a blanket to sit on and walking across to join them on one of the stone blocks Will and he had arranged in the clearing. "Maybe you should conserve the batteries. We don't know how long we'll be marooned here."

Holly tossed her head in the air and laughed. "It's a clockwork radio," she explained. "You wind it up for a minute or two and it lasts maybe half an hour."

Will turned the radio as he approached and he could see the large black crank handle.

"Some call them clockwork radios, but there's no spring," John advised him. "The cranking turns a dynamo that charges the battery a little. And there are solar cells on top, but they're not very efficient. You'd have to leave the thing in the sun all day just to get half an hour's charge. You can charge it with a lead, too, but that's as much use as a chocolate teapot out here in the wilds."

Rowan heard a series of beeps, and they sounded strangely
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familiar. “I’ve heard that before,” he noted.

Will nodded. “Just like the taps the old sailor gave on the door back in Widdensborough: Three short beats, three longer, and then three shorter. Someone told me it meant S.O.S.”

“S.O.S?” Holly queried. “What’s that?”

“Save Our Sausages, I think,” Will replied. “In Moorish Code.”

John laughed. “It means Save Our Souls. It’s a mayday signal that boats used to send out over the radio if the engine had failed, or if they were in danger of sinking and needed help. If they heard the signal, other boats or ships would respond. There was a different sequence of dots and dashes for each letter of the alphabet and the numerals. And it was called Morse Code, not Moorish Code.”

That man really was a mine of information, and useful stuff, too, not trivia. And, thankfully, he was not cocky along with it, as some folk were.

“Shhh!” Holly hissed. “We’re waiting for the news.”

Will checked his watch. “I’m searching around to find a channel that carries a news bulletin. Once we’ve found one, though, we’re set. Here we go: five, four, three, two, one ...”

25. Green Around the Gills

By now they'd left the shelter of the bay and as the fishing boat pitched and rolled in the swell, Special Investigator Morrison was beginning to feel distinctly nauseous, dizzy, and sick. This hadn't escaped the skipper's attention, of course. "You and your men look distinctly green around the gills," the man had noted, and he went over to the first aid cabinet mounted on the wall of the cabin and produced a large green bottle and a spoon. "Open wide," the man requested, and he gave him a tablespoon full of the most noxious medication he'd had in his life, only marginally more bearable than the growing seasickness itself.

The skipper signalled to his mate: "See to the pohlees down below."

"Right, oh," the man replied, taking the bottle and spoon. No "Yes, sir. Right away, sir." No click of the heels, let alone a salute.

Then the skipper turned back to Morrison. "We don't know how you landlubbers would cope in a real storm, being tossed from port to starboard and back again, and yanked off our feet. But then, we suppose it's a matter of 'orses fer courses. Most likely we'd be no use at your job, neither."

By "Horses for courses", he deduced that the man meant that a person suited for one job may not be suited for another job, and he was certainly glad that they were in such capable hands in the pitiless wilds. Morrison was no romantic adventurer.

The trip seemed to last an age, though all praise to the Hive that the weather stayed calm and that the skipper's foul elixir had also worked its magic. But there was indeed land ahead, and finally they approached a wooden jetty with upright white supports, and skilfully navigated alongside. The mate had already hopped onto the jetty and was busy securing the boat fore and aft, and the second boat was not far behind, presumably heading for the other side of the short jetty.

As he clambered down the narrow gangplank, Morrison's legs seemed to have a mind of their own. He felt himself staggering around, as if he were still at sea, and he clung on tightly to the frail rope that hung from poles to the left of the

gangplank.

The skipper was not far behind him, prepared to grab hold of him at a moment's notice. "'Sall right, mate, your legs'll get used to the feel of solid ground if you give 'em time."

As Morrison stood swaying this way and that on the quay, the skipper pointed ahead. "Head on up to the inn, sit yourselves down, get warm in front of the fire, and Mai and Sam'll take good care of you and your men."

Morrison didn't challenge the skipper, but mentally rolled his eyes. And these were the men, thought he, who had ridiculed the idea of land off the coast of Widdensborough and sworn blind that they knew nothing of it, even though he'd liberally greased their palms.

Whatever. As uniform gathered on the quay, he shook the skipper's hand – or rather the man clasped his in an iron grip and shook his – thanked him profusely, and headed off toward the settlement with his men in tow.

26. The First Exploration

They learnt nothing from the two pirate stations that they'd managed to pick up on Will's radio, and unsurprisingly they hadn't heard any reference whatsoever to a hunt for fugitives, let alone their description or names. It was good to hear the rousing calls of the Resistance, however, and heartwarming to know that they were there, with them in spirit if not in the flesh.

John shrugged. "Well, I'm sure they have far bigger fish to fry. Let's face it, guys: we're pretty much non-entities. I mean, it's not as if our activities have been in danger of shaking the very foundations of the Establishment."

Rowan and Holly exchanged discreet glances, but said nothing. The others were, of course, totally unaware of the original scheme that Holly and he had been dragged into. If the others ever found out, even Holly and Will's family ties could well be irrevocably severed. Just as the Hive spoke of the Greater Good, so the Dissidents also had to think of their own personal welfare as well as the greater good.

But, of course, what even Rowan and Holly didn't know about was the interest shown, and investment put in, by those at the top of the food chain: the Vizier and, to a lesser extent, the Queen herself. And hence, the importance and urgency of capturing Rowan, Holly and Jonathan. As for Will and John, the authorities had little concern for them, and probably didn't have them on their agenda, nor on their radar.

The four of them might have been in for a rude awakening had they heard the latest broadcast on *Hive News 24*, but sixty miles off the coast, fortunately or unfortunately they were out of range of the official FM radio broadcasts, though Will had been wondering if they might pick up a weak signal if they could find higher ground, out of the trees.

Will switched off the radio, stood up, and wandered around the site, picking up sufficient smaller pieces of stone and rocks to build a makeshift hearth, if that was what it was called, to surround a small fire. Fortunately, they'd had the sense to deposit the driftwood and deadwood in relative shelter, so though not

tinder-dry, it wasn't wet with dew. Of course, none of them was in the habit of carrying an axe around with them, and the only other useful implement they had was Will's ancient Swiss Army knife, which had a tool for all purposes from uncorking bottles and tin cans to filing your fingernails, but nothing that would cut or split wood. That was a cause of grave concern for Rowan, unaccustomed though he was to bouts of negative thinking. And they had no firelighters.

Thankfully, what Will did have with him in his small survival kit, as well as matches covered in wax to keep them dry, was a box of candles. And, having created a small pyramid-like structure with smaller pieces of wood nearer the base, after a couple of false starts, and more than the odd drip of sweat due to his anxiety, Will finally had a fire going. That day, for breakfast, Holly had a couple of cans of beef soup and vegetable soup on the menu, so they just threw it all into a rectangular aluminium pan and had a makeshift stew. Of course, they could easily have eaten the soup cold, straight out of the cans, but this simple act was a sort of minor rite of passage and a bonding exercise for them, and it gave them fresh hope when most of their other hopes had been dashed and had to be cast aside. And cast from their thoughts, as best they could. So they took their time to savour every last morsel of food.

Of course, Holly couldn't help but cast her mind back to the quayside and think of poor Jonathan, but she had to bind those thoughts tightly and bury them deep for now.

Once breakfast was out of the way, and the pan, mugs, and spoons had been washed down at the beach, they decided it was time to explore the area further. It had not escaped their notice that as yet they had seen no source of fresh, running water. Not even water collecting in a muddy pool anywhere. And again, Rowan had genuine cause for concern. He was not versed in survival skills out in the wilds, but he did know, indirectly through learning about interrogation techniques, that while a person could go for days and days without food, however uncomfortable and weak that might make them feel, the one thing they couldn't go without for long was something to drink or at least something that contained moisture. And no, they could not drink salt water: that would only further dehydrate them.

At the back of his mind, Rowan could envisage that at some point – after days, weeks, months, or due to illness – they might have to give themselves up to the Authorities. Or make a last stand, like old General Custard he'd read about as a child, and put up one hell of a fight.

There was no immediate rush, so rather than split up and risk losing one-another in the tall undergrowth and profuse, tightly-packed trees, they set out to explore together. There were no beaten tracks through the woodland, which was a hopeful sign in a way because it meant that the natives didn't frequent this part of the island. However, Will found definite signs that there must be animals around, pointing out narrow trails that indicated frequent use, the odd piles of droppings, and occasional paw-prints in mud. Unfortunately, Will's survival skills did not extend to identifying the species from such signs, but what he did know was that the presence of animals meant food, and he could probably figure out how to build traps. The Prof, John, could probably help Will out there, given his own intelligence and agile mind.

They found more ruins some way further inland, in the heart of the trees, and again that offered fresh hope, because that must surely mean that the original inhabitants had access to fresh water at least within walking distance.

In the centre, in what had evidently once been a cobbled square, stood a tall statue, and they crossed the open area to marvel at it. It was the figure of a man carved in what was probably white marble, of larger-than-life sized proportions, standing with what looked like a book in his left hand and his right hand pointing into the distance.

The statue was standing on an octagon plinth, in a wide, square paved area, and seeing some writing inscribed on the plinth, Holly went forward, tugged away some creepers around the base, brushed off a layer of dirt and stood back to see if she could make-out the words. Except they weren't words: they were symbols, spanning two of the eight sides.

The Prof came closer and stooped down to see for himself. "Hieroglyphics," he reliably informed her. "Possibly Ancient Egyptian."

Aha!

“But don’t ask me to decipher them, Holly. They mean nothing to me. And yet ...” Crouching down he pulled away more of the creeping shoots, going all the way round the plinth of the statue, with Holly following round, on her haunches, brushing off the dirt. They must have looked a comical pair!

“Ah, now we’re cooking!” the Prof called in delight, pushing himself up, standing back, and walking slowly round the statue. “Eight sides; four different languages.”

That sounded hopeful, and there was a definite lilt to John’s voice, Holly thought.

She followed the Prof round, and they must have circled the statue seven times before he finally came to a stop and stood back, his hand to his stubbly chin, and deep in thought.

Holly shrugged. “It’s all gobbledygook to me.”

“Double Dutch, indeed,” the Prof nodded. He was full of strange expressions like that.

The Prof sat down cross-legged on the grass a few feet from the statue and closed his eyes, scratching his chin and his nose every now and again. Occasionally he lifted the index finger of his right hand as if grasping something; and then swept his hand in front of him as if he were flipping the pages of an unseen book in some deep, dark, arcane library.

“Aha!” he exclaimed, simultaneously jumping to his feet, going back to the statue to re-examine the plinth, and pointing out the wording. “Those are the hieroglyphics, about which I have not got a clue, but which I can possibly work out retrospectively once I’ve deciphered some of the other writing. That Cyrillic script must be ancient Greek. Alas, my father taught me Latin. Again, the third is in a script that I know nothing about. But the fourth? It has words, and a ring about it, a cadence, that are not altogether alien to me; in some ways related to old word roots that we and peoples like us have inherited. It appears to be spelt phonetically, and it’s quite Romantic, really. And if I’m not mistaken, it has been added at a much later date, in more modern times. Possibly only a few years ago, in fact. So perhaps this community has been here for a great many years and seen changing times?”

Again, the Prof was lost in thought, and then – with a deft snap of his fingers, he had it – “It reads, in so many words if not exactly, ‘Strike on this spot for treasure.’”

By this time, however, Rowan and Will, no doubt having more important things to do, had wandered off from the clearing, leaving her and the Prof alone to contemplate the deep and hidden, possibly philosophical, meaning behind the statue.

As for the Prof, he was clearly in his element.

27. The Recluse

The new arrivals were totally oblivious to old Silas's presence as they explored the island and found the ruins, sly cookie that he was, having spent most of his adult life honing his skills. He'd spotted them not far from the beach when they must have first arrived, and he'd had a look at the boat they'd dragged into the bushes. It had a nasty tear in it where bullets must have hit it and splayed out, designed so as to inflict more damage as they emerged through the other side. That would explain the distant shots he'd heard. So most likely these were absconders who'd somehow found out about the island, and fallen into the natives' clever trap. Well, the boat could be easily mended with hot pitch and scraps of thick material. But they wouldn't get far rowing in a thing like that. Maybe they'd be slowly dragged toward the mainland. That's if they were lucky. Most likely they'd be swept further out to sea and certain death. Lot of sharks further east, and waves that would make matchwood of a little boat like that.

Right now, they were delving further into the woods away from the shore, and at some point they'd no doubt find the hill, a vantage point that would allow them to survey the whole island. Of course the mainland was way below the horizon, so they wouldn't be able to see that, and assuming they had been able to, it would only dash their hopes, seeing the vast expanse of cold, grey-blue ocean between them and the coast. And if they were absconders, even if they made it back to Widdensborough, they'd be apprehended before you could say "Jack Robinson". Hive, they called it. A brazen and dastardly counterfeit; a likeness in name only, to the Sarmouni. Now they were Real bees. Or so his ol' Granpop had told him when he was knee-high to a grasshopper. The place these oh-so-Righteous, Hive-Minded people lived in was more like an ant hill. Or a dung heap. You couldn't rightly call them people any more. He spat on the ground with deep contempt and crept back into the bushes.

Of course, these new arrivals could be anybody. They might be good people, but equally they could be criminals. They could

have become deranged by life in the Hive. So he'd better steer well clear of them, too, until such time as he'd got their measure. Either the measure of new friends, or the measure of the hole he'd have to dig in the ground to stuff them in. One or t'other. It was bad enough with the natives, so he wasn't going to put up with any shenanigans or wickedness from any Johnny-come-latelies.

As it was rightly written in the Old Book, the wages of sin are death. And he'd been appointed executioner. He scratched in his long, grey beard. Or was it executor? When his old man had died. It all seemed so long ago and even *his* memory was now fading. Well, it was one or t'other, and he'd probably remember soon enough, most likely after he'd stopped thinking about it.

Thinking always got in the way of memories and the like. Just relax, old Silas, as his Pop used to remind him. It'll come to you of its own accord and in its own sweet time. Just like the birds came to his garden and even willingly settled in his outstretched palm. He didn't even need to bribe them with seeds anymore. They were good friends to him, and no doubt so was he to them. They had a mutual understanding, and trust.

Old Silas absentmindedly toyed with the hilt of his knife.

But if anyone messed with his birds – though perish the thought, thought he – they'd feel the sharp edge of his blade. Sting, he called it, having read a book about such a blade oh-so-many moons ago, the title of which, alas, he had long forgotten. Something about going there and back again. Wherever "there" was.

No matter. Maybe it would come to him some fine day.

28. Treated Like Royalty

Mai, Samuel, and their daughter Helen treated him and his men like royalty from the moment of their arrival, and Morrison was well chuffed. He'd briefly spoken to the boy, but didn't want to tax him just yet, so he'd left the lad in their safe custody, then once the food was ready, he and his men ate in the bar and had a drink. And after an informal natter with Mai and Samuel, and having been already shown to their rooms, they settled down for the night. Tomorrow morning would come soon enough, and none of them were going anywhere. So questions could wait, and the manhunt could wait. He was luckier then his men, of course. While he had a room all to himself, accommodation being scarce, they all had to squeeze themselves into the only two vacant rooms. But, anyway, they'd get to know how the other half lived, out in the sticks, and it would be a change from their usual beat.

Of course, they'd been hand-selected, and bound by the Official Secrets Act to not divulge anything about the Isle of Luntis or its inhabitants, on pain of lobotomy or execution by firing squad. Furthermore, there could be no mention of any of this in the official media. That went without saying. As far as the public was concerned, Kingsley, Potter and their motley crew were at large somewhere on the mainland, perhaps heading for the capital. And they were slowly ramping up the public awareness, with tiny but timely "leaks" through the community grapevine rather than the official press, that their dastardly plots might be treasonous.

On the island there was no phone coverage, not even a cable under the sea. All they had was a radio telephone in the local store, and they only had that so they could call for their monthly supplies, but he'd brought a transceiver with him, so he could contact Widdensborough. Apparently, though the capital was too far away to make direct contact, they could "patch him through" to HQ from Widdensborough, or so he found out after a lot of faffing about on the mainland, and probably a few red ears after he'd lost patience and given them a right bollocking. Anyhow, late in the evening he made a call with a preliminary report,

before turning in for the night.

It did cross his mind that perhaps Mai might keep some alcofrolic brandy in her medicine chest. You know, strictly for medicinal purposes only. He could do with something to help him switch off and get some sleep. Hell, for all he knew, they might have an illicit distillery in some shack out back. And he'd have been perfectly willing to turn a blind eye to the minor indiscretions of these truly patriotic, Hive-Minded, rustic folks. But in the end, he chickened out. It could be that *they* would instead report *him*, if they had a mind to, and then he'd be in deep shit – even up to his neck – with his boss.

Morning came all too soon, and with it, a new arrival. After breakfast he'd been hoping to have a bit of a natter with the lad, who seemed very cooperative, and also send his men off to begin the manhunt. Perhaps they should have brought a sniffer dog with them, but no items of clothing had been left behind, the inn had seen too many other feet on its floors, and in any case, they'd taken off in a rowing boat, and heaven only knew where they'd landed after that. Assuming they had managed to land further along the island. They could be lost at sea, for all anyone knew.

This new and unexpected arrival, though, had other ideas. Someone very high up at HQ had decided that the boy should be moved right away and taken back to the mainland. Where to, the new arrival either did not know or else he was unwilling to divulge this information. All the plain-clothed officer would say, in response to his gentle and tentative enquiries was that it was "above your paygrade, old chap. Both yours and mine."

Old chap? Old *chap*? Anyone who spoke like that had to be from the squeaky corridors of HQ in the capital. And way above Special Investigator Muggins' paygrade. That's for sure. What's more, even *he* appeared to be taking orders from higher up. The plot thickens, Watson. The plot thickens.

So, that was that. As for himself, he was told that he should stay and handle the manhunt, and continue that task until the Diss were apprehended, or he was relieved, or ordered to do otherwise. Whether the officer meant routinely relieved by another officer, or relieved of his rank should he fail in his task, this was left dangling and ambiguous, perhaps deliberately so. Well, it would keep him on his toes, if nothing else.

29. Give Me Shelter

After more than two hours or so, trying every trick in the book that they could think of to physically accomplish what the legend on the statue was intimating, and some madcap schemes that the Prof came up with that definitely were not in the book, or at least not the sort of books that Holly read, they gave up for the day, just as Rowan and Will returned, bearing armfuls of enormous broad leaves. It turned out they were intent on building a makeshift shelter using whatever stone blocks they could rustle-up back at the camp, and these leaves to build a roof that would at least keep most of the rain off and keep a little heat in. They were carrying as many of the leaves as they could, so they handed these over to her and John and went off to find more, being careful not to strip too many leaves off any one plant.

"We found a spring, too, and a shallow pool of clear fresh water," Rowan called back. "But what we really need is a container of some sort larger than that fizzy pop bottle we've been drinking from."

More food for thought for their resident Prof.

The rest of the day was pretty uneventful. Really, they should have been working from dawn to dusk to figure out how to gather together the basics for their survival. At least the guys had almost completed the shelter, having managed to locate some long, slender creepers that they could actually de-thorn, strip from end to end, and use as cord to bind the leaves together. And she'd gone off with Rowan a couple of times to collect as much water as they had containers to carry it in. What they could really do with, in lieu of a bucket, was some sort of gourd or an animal's stomach. Dream on, Holly Potter; dream on. Of course, if they once managed to solve issues like this, then it would be so much easier for them the next time, so it helped to remind herself that this was just a matter of taking things one small step at a time. The important thing was to keep moving. Says she, as she sits ruminating on a rock back at base camp.

In the late afternoon they'd all gone off on a hunt to gather as much, or as little, edible food as they could. Well, to gather as

much as they needed to eat that evening and for breakfast the next day.

When they returned to camp, having found nothing more than a couple of mugs full of berries and some unspecified root vegetables and tubers that Will had volunteered to try first, Holly noticed something odd just by the hearth of the unlit campfire. It was a long rolled package. It was something wrapped up in what looked and felt like oiled hide. Very carefully, she unrolled it, especially careful to keep the contents, whatever they were, out of the dirt.

Inside were two fine-looking fish, and they'd even been cut open, de-gutted, and cleaned out, too. The heads were still attached, which Holly found a little gross, but no doubt someone like Will would volunteer to suck the eyeballs.

"Oh, wow guys! Thanks. That's perfect."

"Thanks for what?" Rowan queried, wandering over to take a peek.

"The fish," she replied, motioning toward the unrolled package with her hand.

"Is this your fine work, Will?" Rowan wanted to know. They'd seen that he had a few hooks and a reel of nylon line in his survival kit.

Both Will and John came over now to see what all the excitement was about.

"Not me," replied Will, shaking his head, and there was little point in asking the Prof. She didn't think that fishing would be his forte, man of mystery and resourcefulness though he undoubtedly was.

They were all sitting down now, looking intently at the two fish.

"Just to be clear, guys, since this is spooking me out. As they sometimes say in whodunnits, would the real fisherman please stand up."

Nobody even flinched or blushed, let alone stood up.

John's eyes were wide with anxiety now. "You do realise what this means," he said, and it sounded like he had something stuck in his throat.

"That we're not alone, here," Rowan nodded, and he checked that he still had his disrupter to hand. He'd drained it back at the

quayside, but the emergency charge had by now done as much as it could, and given him a few more blasts. After that, he might as well toss the thing away.

"Now let's not be too hasty," John advised in a hushed tone, once he'd recovered his composure. "Rather than representing a threat, it could be a peace offering from the natives."

An awful thought passed momentarily through Holly's mind. What if the natives were headhunters? But she quickly brushed that crazy notion aside.

Will thought for a moment. "When it's cooked, I'll take the first bite, just to be on the safe side." Then, after some further thought, "And I think we should take turns on guard duty tonight. With eight hours sleep, we'll each take a two hour shift. Or we could split the shift into two, if you like?"

"Okay," Holly nodded. "Will, if you can get the fire going, then Rowan and I can get cooking."

"I have some further thoughts about the enigmatic legend," John offered as they set to work.

She was pleased to hear that, but now was not the time. "Later, Prof. Or tomorrow morning for sure. Don't worry, I haven't forgotten about our little puzzle." And no, she wasn't neglecting him, but she couldn't say that to his face.

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As it turned out, the fish has been delicious and hadn't upset their stomachs at all, let alone killed them off, and they passed the night peacefully, with little more than the hoot of an owl somewhere in the trees. Quite how an owl should make it to the island, Holly didn't know, but there it was, sure enough, and she was pleased to have the company.

And there was another thing. When they woke up, Holly found a second gift, because not far from the unlit campfire there was an old, zinc-plated bucket waiting for them, two-thirds full of fresh water. So one of them must have dozed off on sentry duty and their mysterious benefactor had taken the opportunity to steal into the camp. Certainly there was nothing missing; just this latest and most helpful addition.

Anyhow, setting that aside and breakfast out of way, Holly grabbed hold of the John's arm and guided him off toward the ruins. He needed no further encouragement.
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They stood there in the paved square for some time, and finally she spoke.

"I don't think it's obvious, Prof, like striking 'here' on the plinth itself. Nor is it wherever the statue appears to be pointing."

"Something to do with the shadow, then."

Holly nodded.

"But the shadow moves throughout the day," he noted.

Again she nodded. "Now, there's a special time of day when the sun will be in the right place to cast the shadow in exactly the right spot."

"Mid-day!" he exclaimed, and it looked like a bright yellow lightbulb had been switched on in his head. "When the sun is at its highest."

"Exactly!" she beamed, affectionately rubbing the man's arm.

Prof checked his watch. "It's almost twelve now."

"Right again!" she smiled. Indeed, she'd planned it that way. The answer had suggested itself in a rather vivid dream she'd had the previous night. Perhaps she'd subconsciously known, deep down inside her. Or perhaps she was in some strange way inspired. "So let's pay close attention. Let me know when it's twelve. And pray that the sun doesn't slip behind the clouds."

They didn't have to wait long, and as Prof counted down the seconds, she got down on her haunches and marked the spot using a piece of white chalk that she'd borrowed from Will.

She stood back. "There we are then, X marks the spot: right in the centre of that paving slab. Well, give or take an inch or two."

Prof got down on his knees and felt around the edges of the slab. "It's going to take more than broken fingernails to shift this slab," he noted. "We're going to need tools of some sort."

"Better tap into Will's know-how," she decided and he readily agreed.

"Stay here, Prof, and I'll go collar him and Rowan."

"Right, oh," he agreed, and it was only after she'd gone and he realised that he'd been left on his own here that John began to feel a little uneasy. Irrationally uneasy, of course, but ill at ease all the same.

30. Given a Good Thrashing

Whatever Morrison might have believed, Frampton had received no such orders from either Enforcement or Special Investigations, nor were they informed in advance of the intervention. In fact his orders came from the Vizier himself, and it was to him alone that Frampton was answerable. And by the time the Plod found out what was happening, it would be too late. Of course, by now it was probable Morrison would have contacted HQ for confirmation – perhaps something that the man should have done in the first place – but by the time they had responded, perhaps waiting for his arrival at Widdensborough, he would be well on his way with the lad, sailing south and then up river toward the capital.

Perhaps the most worrying thing about the affair was that other than taking a casual glance at the warrant card that he'd proffered, Morrison had made no further attempt to verify his identity. He could have been a member of the Dissidents there to brazenly rescue the lad and take him to safety. He could have been anybody. You could easily lose your job, or even your freedom, for such a gross and negligent lapse of judgement. But anyway, for Frampton, all that was water under the boat, you might say and, unlike Morrison, he wouldn't lose a wink of sleep over it.

It would be a long voyage, with nothing he could do to assist the captain in the wheelhouse, and in any case that prospect was as tedious as watching paint dry, so he passed the time instead down in one of the cabins playing games with young Jonathan. Well, games and a little gentle digging, since he had more than an idle curiosity about the sort of people his Dissident parents, Potter and Kingsley, were and about their clandestine activities. He'd tried to pull up Kingsley's record to find out more about him, but he must have been a big fish, because even with his security clearance, he couldn't dig very deep, and the scant details, about which he was somewhat dubious, provided very little information. And the same went for the Potter woman. She clearly had a Dissident past, and convictions, and she'd spent

quite a lot of her time being subjected to interrogation and later locked up, but again, beyond that, he could find out little. In a nutshell, the official accounts simply did not add up. So, clearly the Office of the Vizier, and most likely the man himself, knew things that he did not. Possibly a great many things, some of which, according to office gossip, probably started with the capital letter "T" for Treason. Of course, he'd seen items on the news that talked of a national manhunt, but no mention of the island. He had been told by his own boss that this was all very hush-hush and advised in the strongest terms not to go digging any further. And, since it was likely that his every move online was being monitored – as ever, in the interests of the "Greater Good" – he thought it wise to comply, much as he was indeed itching to find out more.

As for the lad himself, he had a very bright and inquiring mind. You could say an inquisitive mind. Indeed, just the sort of mind that they were on the lookout for in Special Investigations. Nothing slipped past him unnoticed, not even off-the-cuff remarks. And the boy had given him a good thrashing at chequers. Young Jonathan had noticed the chess set, too, and demanded to be taught the rules. The first game they had, he let the lad win while he getting the hang of the movements that the pieces could make on the board. But blow me, by the third game the lad was clearly thinking ahead, and thinking in patterns, and it was all he could do to force the lad into a stalemate. Had they continued, he already knew in his gut that the lad would have beaten him.

Which is a long-winded way of saying that maybe it wasn't just the parents that the Vizier was interested in, but the boy himself – and not for the obvious reasons such as a desire to interrogate him and dredge up information he might be holding, hidden beneath of level of conscious awareness. There was something very special, verging on the extraordinary, and also deeply disturbing, about young Jonathan Potter, even now at such a young age. Goodness knows what he'd be capable of by the time he reached manhood. On second thoughts, perhaps "goodness" simply didn't figure in the equation. Not that the lad wasn't polite, genial and cooperative, at least on the surface. It's what was going on behind the lad's eyeballs that worried – even

unnerved – Frampton, Senior Aide to the Vizier or not.

31. Heart-Thumping

John stiffened. Again he heard a slight sound behind him, perhaps a small stone crushed against the cobbles. A wave of raw adrenaline swamped him. Set his heart thumping heavily in his chest. His legs almost buckled beneath him. He was about to run, but a more instinctive force thrust itself upon him. He spun round on his heels and his hands came up defensively.

"Steady, lad. Steady," came the voice. His heart leapt a second time as he saw the grey figure only feet away from him.

"Now, let's not do anything hasty," the man advised him, raising his right hand, palm facing him. "There's no cause for alarm."

It was an old man, with long, greasy grey hair, a shaggy moustache and matching bushy beard. He was dressed in grimy and ragged green and grey clothes with some kind of fur jacket covering his arms and upper body. Not the sort you'd buy in a store, though: this was a patchwork of small pieces, roughly stitched together with coarse thread. And the old man looked like he'd been shipwrecked many years ago.

The man took a couple of steps back, and John felt the wave of adrenaline beginning to subside. His heart was still beating fast, though; his chest was heaving; and he was short of breath.

"Who. Are. You?" he asked. It wasn't meant to sound like a demand, but the words didn't come easily.

"I was about to ask you the same question, young 'un," the man replied, brushing a few leaves aside and sitting down, with some apparent effort, on the flagstones in front of him. Perhaps to show that he presented no threat, like a dog might adopt a submissive or playful position.

John still didn't know quite what he should do, but something prompted him to mirror the man's actions, and he sat down nearby, but not too close.

Once John had more fully settled down, the old man asked, "Well, lad, do you want to go first, or should I?"

"You first, sir," he replied.

"In that case, maybe we'd better wait until your companions

return, then I won't have to repeat myself," the old man decided. "And no doubt you'll feel safer in their company."

"You've been watching us, then." It was a statement, not a question.

The old man nodded. "Since not long after you first arrived. But I was wary of you. I still am, for that matter, but not half as much."

"Can't be too careful these days," John agreed, palpably relaxing.

"You're not wrong there, young'un. No question of that: these are bad times we're living through. Even here on the island. 'Course it wasn't always like this here. Like the Garden of Eden it was, or so my ole Granpop used to say."

John raised his eyebrows. "So you've heard of the Old Book, then?" he wanted to know.

"Heard about it, yes. Most likely my ole Granpop had read it or at least had it read to him. But so many years have passed, and memories have a habit of fading as you get older."

The old man tapped the side of his head. "Like there's some damn gremlin inside your skull – and maybe more than one – going round zapping all the things you used to know and love, one by one by one. Sad state of affairs, that. Very sad."

The others were arriving at this point, and John caught sight of Rowan reaching inside his jacket for his disrupter, but the old man, already sensing their approach or perhaps seeing the sudden shift in John's gaze, raised his right hand and beckoned them forward, without turning to face them or spring to his feet.

They walked across the cobbled stones and onto the flagged square not far from the statue, and sat down to either side of John, facing the old man.

Holly was the first to speak, and she introduced them, pointing them out, one by one. "This is John, whom you've already met. Or the Prof as we now call him. That's Rowan; Will; and I'm Holly."

"Silas," the man nodded. "Can't say as I recall my second name. Not many folks around these parts to remind me of such things since my dear old Mom and Pop passed on."

"Hi, Silas," Holly smiled.

"Passed on, you say?" John queried.

“Popped their clogs,” Silas replied.

John knew what the old man was saying, but the others were still none the wiser.

“Joined the choir invisible, as my ole Granpop would have said. Went to heaven.”

“Ah, they died,” nodded Holly, with a hint of concern in her eyes. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Silas shrugged. “It was all such a long time ago, or at least it feels like it was.”

“So, you’re the kind gentleman who left us the gifts of fish and a bucket,” Holly smiled. “That was very kind of you.”

Silas cast his eyes down, perhaps unaccustomed to receiving praise from a pretty young lady. “Least I could do,” he replied.

“So you trust us?” enquired Will.

“I watched you for long enough to see that you seemed decent enough folk, unlike the natives. I keep well away from them.”

“Do they know you’re here?” Rowan wanted to know.

“Oh, they know I’m here, though we’ve never once met.” The old man cast his arms around in a wide circle. “It’s a big island and they’re creatures of habit: they stay around their settlements and very seldom venture into the interior. Got a disdain and a fear of the wilds of nature, you see. Every now and again, one of the youngsters might stray from the beaten path, but they’ve only ever got the briefest glimpse of my shadow amongst the trees, and that scares them, you see, so they stay well clear.”

“Well, that’s good for us, too,” Rowan nodded.

“Not for much longer, I fear,” the old man replied, a pained expression on his face as he shifted his gaze from one of them to the other.

“Why’s that?” Holly wanted to know.

“Because I seen a whole bunch of pohlees down by the quayside, that’s why,” Silas told them gravely. “’Course, it’ll be days before they find your camp and the ruins here, and we can be way across the other side of the island by then, and they may have to call in more help and tracker dogs. But I’m worried that they’ll find you eventually. Even find me, too.”

Then, perhaps wanting to sweeten this warning, he added: “I think I can give them the run around for a few days, so there’s no

immediate cause for alarm."

That was a minor relief, at least, thought John.

Holly sucked her finger thoughtfully and glanced toward the Prof, wondering whether it would be wise to broach the subject of the hidden treasure, but something told her that this would be inappropriate at that moment in time. Their very survival could be at stake, which drastically changed her perspective; primitive and yet complex, age-old archetypal energies were now flowing; and arcane forces were mobilising and taking charge.

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They were still at the ruins, engaged in earnest discussion. Silas had gone off into the trees on some unspecified errand, but he'd promised to return as soon as he was able. All they could do was have faith in human nature and hope that he wouldn't take the easy course and betray their trust.

Rowan did think it might have been wiser had one of them gone with the man to make sure that he wasn't intent on causing them mischief. But Holly put that down to deep-rooted suspicions that came with his old life as an Enforcer, invasive thoughts that would take years to more fully eradicate. If ever. If such a thing were even humanly possible.
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32. The Manhunt

Back at *The Last Chance* inn, Special Investigator Morrison was in a foul mood. He was angry that the "old chap" Frampton, or whatever his name was, had been working not for the Force as he'd foolishly assumed, but for the Vizier. And he was angry at himself for having given the man's credentials even less than a cursory glance while his mind was otherwise engaged. And his anger also papered-over his chagrin and anxiety at the rollicking (bollocking) he had received from his contact at HQ, having failed to follow protocol and failed to get the okay from his superiors. That's precisely what protocol and the chain of command were there to guard against, as any damn rookie could have told him.

And, of course, he was hoping to have a better chat to the lad, and perhaps earn himself a few nectar points, but that was all rather dry and academic now. Instead, his goose was currently being thawed out and stuffed before being well and truly roasted.

The contact at HQ would be reporting the matter to his own superiors, and they in turn would be sending a nasty red memo to his local Chief Super. Most likely a replacement would be dispatched to the island, and he would have to return to base to face the music. Had he partaken of illicit substances, now would have been the time to smoke like a crematorium chimney, drink himself into bog-eyed oblivion, and take a long walk off the short pier.

Well, there was only one thing for it. He had to show that he meant business. At the crack of dawn that morning, much to their dismay, he personally roused his men and, as soon as they'd finished a hasty breakfast, and collected their provisions, he had them lined up in front of the inn and gave them their orders.

The manhunt was on, and given what he had now found out about the extent of the island, and the dense woodland that covered most of it, he'd sent for more men and a couple of sniffer dogs. He had hoped that they might be able to go around the coast to the south, the direction in which the absconders had been heading, or perhaps hire a boat to look for possible landing spots,

or signs of an abandoned rowing boat. But no, the nature of the terrain demanded that they had to trudge and possibly even hack their way through the dense woodland and undergrowth in the interior, and the sharpest implement that Mai had to offer them was a bread knife. He'd been warned that the trees were thick with brambles, which he learnt were creeping, fruit-bearing plants armed with an arsenal of sharp thorns that would penetrate the skin even through trousers, even ripping gaping holes in the fabric, and often causing the wounds to become infected. This would present a major obstacle and hazard in itself. To make matters worse, one of the salty old seamen at the inn had told him that bad weather was on the way, so they'd need to be well wrapped-up.

Double-checking that he had the knife with him and his disrupter was fully charged, taking note of the time, and blowing his whistle, without further ado the manhunt commenced.

33. The Voyage

“Change of plan,” the skipper informed Frampton, pushing back the sliding door and entering the cabin without bothering to knock or at least politely cough.

Frampton had thought that the lad had been asleep, but now he had one eye open, and he was clearly listening. He’d probably learnt that trick, and far more besides, while living with the Dissidents.

“Go on,” he nodded.

“Bad weather forecast,” the skipper reported. “So we’ll have to put in at Bathness. Be there within the hour.”

“But I have my orders. Plans have been laid.”

The captain shrugged. “Not much use having orders and plans and high-falutin’ ideas if you’re swimming with the fishes, now is it, pal? You’ll just have to make alternative arrangements.”

“Damn!” he cursed.

The captain checked his watch. “Happen things will work out better than you expect. There’s sure to be an early morning train from Bathness. Take you all the way to the city, I don’t doubt. A lot quicker than getting there by paddle steamer, in fact, and in much greater comfort. You’ll be there in a fraction of the time.”

Well, that certainly perked him up. “Thank you. Thank you very much, Captain!” he lilted.

Then, slipping out of the cabin and sliding the door-to behind him, he whispered in the skipper’s ear: “Tell me, you don’t happen to have anything decent to drink, do you? Some of the real mucky? I’ll gladly pay you double what it’s worth. Triple? How about twenty credits, will that do?”

The skipper scratched in his bushy ginger beard thoughtfully. “The Real McCoy, you say? Well, happen we might come to a mutually agreeable arrangement. You’d best come topside with me.”

Of course, Frampton should have known full well by now that nothing escaped that boy’s attention.

34. The Legend of the Pointing Finger

Finally, the old man returned to the ruins, making sure that they could see him as he was emerging from the trees, and raising his right hand in peaceful greeting. In his left hand he was carrying something heavy, a bag, and he had to put it down for a few moments and then switch hands.

Rowan was already trotting across the square to meet him, and Silas gladly allowed Rowan to relieve him of the burden, and even he could feel the weight.

"You should have told us, Silas, and I'd have gone with you to help."

"No trouble," the old man replied. "But the least you know about my own lair, the better."

They walked back across the square toward the others, and Silas took the heavy bag from him and staggered across the flagstones to present it at Holly's feet.

"What's this?" she enquired.

"Something you'll be needing," Silas beamed.

"For what?"

"For your task. You and your Professor friend."

She unzipped the long bag and looked inside.

"Tools?"

That much was obvious.

"Tools," he nodded.

Holly sighed. "That's really most kind and thoughtful of you, Silas, but right now we are in deep doo-doo."

Silas looked askance.

"Terrible danger," she explained.

"This is important work, too," Silas advised her. "And don't worry, I hasn't forgot about the danger. Humour an old man for a few minutes would you?"

Will had come across now and he took a look inside the bag. Rummaging around, he brought out a heavy crow bar, the sort

that Crims used to jemmy doors off their hinges. Enforcers just used shaped charges and blew doors in.

"Perfect," Prof nodded, coming closer.

"Important work, you say?" Rowan queried.

"Perhaps more important than our own survival," Silas nodded. "Of course, if you need to take a vote …"

Holly puckered her lips. "You really have been watching our every move, haven't you."

She cast her eyes around the assembled team. "Okay, I think the motion's carried. But first, Silas, perhaps you should tell us what you know about this treasure."

With a struggle, Silas sat down on the flagstones, and they followed his lead.

"If you're sitting comfortably, then I shall begin," he chortled. "That's what my ole Granpop used to say."

Quite tickled by the expression, Holly laughed: "Once upon a time …"

"That's exactly right, Holly. Once upon a time, very long ago but not a million miles from here …"

The old man sighed. "I'm sorry, I'd like to start at the very beginning of the story, but I've forgotten so much that my ole Granpop must have told me. And maybe he and even his own Gramps didn't know about the origins of Arcady.

"But one thing that he did know about was the legend behind the treasure."

The old man reached inside his coat and brought out a tatty old notebook, its stiff binding covered in year upon year of grime. "And I can at least tell you about the legend. He wrote it all down and passed it on to my Mom and in her turn she passed it on to me. And I'm told that prior to that, the legend had been passed on down the generations by word of mouth."

The Prof was clearly excited, and could hardly contain himself. "By oral tradition," he offered.

Holly looked around. "But if you all knew about the tradition, why not just dig up the paving stones. By now, you could have excavated the whole site, for that matter?"

The old man shook his head briskly. "Oh no, no, no. That wouldn't be the right thing to do at all. It wouldn't be playing by the rules. We couldn't allow anyone to go digging for the treasure

willy-nilly. They had to deserve finding the treasure in a manner in keeping with the spirit behind the puzzle of the hidden treasure. They had strict rules about that, and whenever someone chanced their arm and dug somewhere, it was all covered over again so others wouldn't know. And my ole Granpop, my Mom and Pop, and I stuck to the rules."

Holly nodded. "I rudely interrupted you, Silas, and I'm sorry. Do go on."

The old man fished out an old pair of reading glasses, one lens cracked and held in place with what might have been a piece of adhesive bandage. Then, cradled in his lap, he very carefully opened the old book and turned what looked like fragile, yellowed pages.

Silas began to read the text, and he did this with some confidence, as if he knew the words by heart, perhaps having read them to himself on many an occasion:

"Dhun-Nun the Egyptian explained graphically in a parable how he extracted knowledge concealed in Pharaonic inscriptions.

"There was a statue with pointing finger, upon which was inscribed: 'Strike on this spot for treasure.' Its origin was unknown, but generations of people had hammered the place marked by the sign. Because it was made of the hardest stone, little impression was made on it, and the meaning remained cryptic.

"Dhun-Nun, wrapped in contemplation of the statue, one day exactly at midday observed that the shadow of the pointing finger, unnoticed for centuries, followed a line in the paving beneath the statue.

"Marking the place he obtained the necessary instruments and prised up by chisel-blows the flagstone, which proved to be the trapdoor in the roof of a subterranean cave which contained strange articles of a workmanship which enabled him to deduce the science of their manufacture, long since lost, and hence to acquire the treasures and those of a more formal kind which accompanied them."

But what? Just wait a minute! Holly and the Prof exchanged glances. "Silas," she gasped. "But if you've actually known the answer to the legend all these years …"

Rowan nodded in agreement. "As I might have once

remarked, before I joined the Dissidents, and was still so Hive-Minded, 'This does not compute.'"

Silas closed the book gently and put his reading glasses back in his pocket, a smile creasing his weather-beaten face. "I and my forebears weren't treasure seekers, or truth-seekers, ourselves. We were merely custodians. And we were the ones who kept the site in good repair. Watching, waiting, hoping against all hope at times, that one day, someone would come along – like your good selves, Holly and Professor – solve the riddle, and show yourselves worthy."

They were all silent for a time.

"I don't think that this is the original statue. Perhaps not even the original treasure – though I could well be wrong," he said at length. "But after years and years of head-scratching and pondering, I've convinced myself that, just like this ruined community, it was inspired by even more ancient tales such as this.

"As for what kind of treasure might be found here, well I'll leave that for you to decide. It might have rotted away or perished after all these years. Or there might be nothing left there at all. I don't know. But what I do know is that it's time for you to find out. Indeed, this is an exceedingly portentous time."

"But don't you want the treasure for yourself? You should at least have your fair share," Holly insisted, immediately thinking that maybe she could have rephrased that, and giving herself a slap on the wrist. "I mean, it's your treasure, not ours. we're interlopers on your island."

Silas laughed and cast his arms wide. "Look around you. I'm an old man who won't see many more springtimes, and I have all the treasure I need, right here." He tapped his chest. "And especially in here.

"Besides which, my own task as custodian is now almost complete."

Then he took a deep breath. "So, finally fulfilling the ancient legend. That is another matter of far greater importance. And you, Holly and Professor, have proved yourselves worthy of this final task. Your coming here was no mere happenstance. It was clearly written in your stars."

Holly reached over and held the old man's warm but leathery,

wrinkled hand. He didn't pull away. "And yours, too, dear Silas, to have kept the tradition alive and to have witnessed this."

And she added, feeling the moisture rising in her eyes and blurring her vision, "And I'm sorry that your people are not here with you to see it."

The old man squeezed her hand and smiled. "Please don't feel sorry for me, Holly. You see, they are here now. They're with us every step of the way, from cradle to grave, if we only knew. And beyond, if you believe in that sort of thing."

He laughed. "And even if you don't. It's no skin off their nose."

35. A Mad Dash

Just two hours later, thanks to the skipper putting on more steam, and another twenty credits, Frampton and the boy were onboard the train. They only just managed to catch it, following a mad, and equally expensive, dash across town in a cab and an even more mad dash on foot through the station, waving his warrant card in the air and calling out loudly “Hive business! Hold that train!” But, thank their Lucky Bees, they made it. Doubly fortunate, it was an express and only made a couple of short stops on the way to the capital. The regular train would have zigzagged between half a dozen cities and stopped at many larger towns.

There weren’t that many passengers on the train, mostly commuters, which was a good thing. He wasn’t sure what the boy might have come out with, had anyone struck up a conversation with them. Of course, he could always have played his trump card and waved his warrant card in their faces if the lad touched on delicate subjects or kicked up a fuss.

He’d been on the phone to HQ and, in spite of his lack of sleep, the Vizier himself, no less, had insisted that immediately upon their arrival in the capital, they were to take a car which would be waiting for them, and proceed directly to his residence at Lexington, which was off Queensway and adjacent to the Palace.

On no account was he to surrender the boy to anyone other than the Vizier himself. Not to anyone, the woman on the other end of the line insisted. That order presumably extended even to “She who was not on this occasion named”.

Rumour had it that there was no love lost between the Vizier and his Queen. And very hushed and discreet rumour at that. One poor sod who’d blurted it out in the presence of the wrong people, at the wrong place and at the wrong time, had been quietly taken aside and disposed of on the spot without a further word being spoken.

36. The Treasure

"Well then, what are we waiting for?" Silas beamed, jumping to his feet with surprising agility and rubbing his hands together in glee.

Holly weighed the crow bar in her hand and peered at the large paving slab with "X marks the spot" on it.

Rowan was ahead of her. "You insert the crow bar and Will and I will do the rest."

"Me and Prof," she insisted.

Rowan nodded and John came forward to stand at her side, and together they carefully inserted the slim end of the crow bar in the gap between the slabs. She flexed her muscles, and Prof helped her, but the slab barely budged. Rowan came forward now and with a great deal of effort, he lifted the lip of the slab. Then Will, she and the Prof got their hands round the edges, and lifted it aside. The Prof was thinking ahead, too, and he ran over to get a couple of branches that they could slip under the heavy slab, or they wouldn't be able to get their fingers under it later to shift it.

"Smart thinking, Prof!"

"Not just a pretty face," he laughed.

"Not even a pretty face," she laughed. She could get away with saying things that the other guys could not.

"Only joking!" she added hastily, seeing the Prof's face drop. Beneath that crisp coating lay a beating heart of gold.

Where the slab had been, there was some sort of trapdoor. It was made of a very dark, dense and solid hardwood with a resin-like sheen all over it, and even after all these years there was no sign of fungal growth or rot. At one end there were three stout hinges which, though grimy-looking, showed no sign of rust or corrosion. These discoveries in themselves were sufficient to attract Prof's interest and admiration.

Most important of all, though, was the large metal ring at one end. Again, she and Prof tried their hand but they could only lift the trapdoor a little and for a very short time before they had to drop it again.

Will grabbed the crow bar again and, threading it through the

ring, he and Rowan managed to lift the lid as far as it would go, then leave it resting there, quite safely, a short way beyond the vertical. The stout hinges had squeaked a little, but they could probably have taken twice the weight.

Holly bent forward to peer inside. All she could make out was a very steep flight of steps, without backs to them, and beyond that just pitch blackness.

Will had his pack with him and he rummaged inside and brought out five candles and wooden holders and they soon had one lit.

"Okay, so who's going first?" Will enquired.

Silas shook his head and pointed to Holly.

"It could be dangerous," Rowan pointed out.

"So could the steps," she replied, lighting her candle from the one Will was carrying. "And I'm the least heavy."

She dipped her toe in and tested the first step, while Rowan stood by anxiously.

"Okay so far. They look as solid as the hatch. And woodworm would break their teeth on that."

Turning round to face the steps, she threw caution to the wind and took a couple of steps down. "It's fine, guys."

When she was down she waved the candle, which lit up her face, and the others prepared to descend.

Prof came next, and she stood aside to give him room, then Silas. That was only right. And, seeing that there was more than sufficient room for them all, Will and Rowan followed on behind. It was only when they were all down inside that Holly suddenly realised that maybe they should have left one or two of the strong guys topside in case the hatch snapped shut.

"What's up?" Rowan wanted to know, spotting the look of concern that flashed across her features.

She laughed. "Oh, nothing, sweetheart. Just me being paranoid, that's all."

Sweetheart. It had been a while since she'd called him that, but then they hadn't had much time alone and carefree in recent days.

Holly turned around slowly and tried to take in the layout of the chamber. It was quite large, actually, with three stout stone pillars running the length of it, and curved arches reaching across

to the four sides. As for the walls, they were made of stone, just like the ruins above ground.

Along one of the long sides there were four shelves made of the same dense, almost black wood as the hatch and steps, supported by sturdy wooden legs, and securely fastened to the wall. Along one shelf were numerous clay containers with inscriptions on them that she couldn't decipher, though thankfully not in inscrutable hieroglyphics. For a moment, she did consider opening one of the containers to see what was inside, then thought better of that idea, as it might ruin the contents, and in any case, she discovered, the gap between the containers and their lids had been sealed with wax or some similar substance.

Holly checked the tiled floor and there was no sign of water, nor even patches of damp on the walls, and the ceiling was perfectly dry.

As for Silas, his hand had found one of numerous solid black blocks on a lower shelf and he showed it to Rowan.

"Holy shit, is that what I think it is?!" he exclaimed, as Silas tossed it to him. But as soon as he felt it and sniffed it, his face changed.

"Sorry," he laughed. "I thought for a minute we might have stumbled on a secret stash of hashish." Then: "But how come it's so bulbous at the base?"

"Pitch," the Prof reliably informed him. "You see, it's not actually a solid. Like glass, believe it or not, pitch only appears to be solid. It's a highly viscous liquid that appears solid at room temperature but is actually a fluid that flows extremely slowly over time. You have a look at really, really old windows, and sometimes you'll see the same sort of effect."

"John, you really are a mine of information."

"Okay, so where's the treasure?" Rowan ventured to ask.

Will, meanwhile was searching the rest of the chamber, and he let out a whoop of joy. "I think I've found some!" he beamed, pointing at one of three small wooden chests on the floor. He tried to pick one up, but it was way too heavy even for him. Of course, they all just had to go and look. Except John, that was. He was engrossed by something he'd found on a nearby table.

"If that's not gold, I'll eat my hat," Rowan exclaimed. Holly opened a second chest. "And rubies, by the look of it." And

sapphires, Will noted, opening the third. “But no diamonds?”

“Diamonds?” John scoffed, though not looking up from whatever it was that he was so engrossed in. “They’re not that rare, nor are they really valuable except for their exceptional hardness, and maybe their optical properties.”

Holly stepped back and looked around her. There were so many different things in the chamber that it would easily take them a week to sift through them all.

“As far as their use for jewellery is concerned, diamonds are one big con. Nothing more than a damn clever marketing ploy playing on people’s ignorance or indifference,” John added. He turned toward them and motioned them over. “But if you’re interested in *real* treasure, here it is. Come see for yourselves.”

Silas just stood there, patiently watching and grinning like a Cheddar cat.

On the bare wooden table in front of John was a large, thick rectangular object that looked like it had been wrapped in oiled hide and several inner layers of a fine, silk-like material that John had since draped over the top of it. And further back on the table was what looked like a wooden lectern, which is presumably where the object had been kept.

Holly immediately thought it must be a book. And as the Prof gracefully peeled back the silk, she saw that it actually was a book, with a binding not unlike the hard-backed tomes dating back to before the Hive was first established.

“Da-dah!” John announced with a flourish, though clearly taking the greatest of care with the book.

Will and Rowan didn’t look that enthusiastic about the book, even if it was as old as it looked.

But Holly could appreciate that such an old book would be a treasure in the Prof’s eyes, and she could see that old Silas was beaming from ear to ear.

“So, what’s it say?” Will wanted to know.

Professor John shrugged. “I haven’t read it yet. In fact we’re going to have to take the greatest case in opening it. It’s clearly well-preserved, but it may also be very delicate. Even the grease in fingerprints or moisture in the air might damage it over time.”

What she could see, however was the gold lettering on what must be the front cover, on the spine, and even over the edges of

the pages. It must have been a precious item to whoever made it, and whoever kept it so safe.

"My friends," said John, perhaps noting that the others were a little underwhelmed, already carefully and ceremoniously wrapping it back up. "This must be the find of the century. Perhaps of the millennium."

"Oh, it's far more than that," Silas chipped in, wiping a tear from his eye.

"It's old, but it's not that old," the Prof had already concluded.

"You're right, young Professor," Silas nodded, hardly able to take his eyes off the object, even though it was by now safely wrapped-up once more. "It's a copy made many years ago, long before the Hive was spawned."

Holly saw that Silas almost spat out that word.

"It's a faithful copy of a far more ancient text that was written in languages that we would probably not be able to decipher, even with the great advances that have been made in – what do you call that newfangled technology?"

"AI?" she offered. "Artificial Intelligence?"

Silas nodded. "Yes, certainly artificial something-or-other."

Again, he almost spat out the word.

"I don't know: artificial sweeteners, artificial flavourings, artificial colourings, artificial flowers, artificial grass, artificial intelligence – and all consumed by blessed artificial people. What do they call them? Bloomin' robots, that's what. Or leastways that's where they're headin'. Off to hell in a ruddy handcart, if you ask me. And what makes it all the worse is that they're actually enjoying it, at least on the surface, and looking forward to more.

"And women who look like blow up rubber dolls."

She thought perhaps Silas was getting confused here with things that went on before the Hive rose to power, indeed part of the reason that they originally rose to power, before sex was frowned upon, was sanctioned, and eventually became taboo. But she didn't want to interrupt his flow. For the first time perhaps in many years, he was on fire.

"I know it might seem obvious, at least to present company, but it just ain't natural. It's all so counterfeit."

Of course, thought Holly, counterfeits only exist because of the real thing.

"And who do they put in charge of it all? Ruddy psychopaths, who'd sell their own Gramps without the least compassion or empathy, let alone common sense and common decency, that's who!"

Holly thought it time to get Silas back on track, not that he was wrong about any of this. The old man was spot on. And he'd clearly survived on his own, brooding over these big issues and with nobody around to bounce them off, for far too long, poor soul. She affectionately rubbed his shoulder and arm.

"You've been talking about the text, but how do you know all this, Silas? Surely you've never been down here."

Silas spread his hands wide. "Because I'm a custodian. Last in a long, long line of custodians." He shrugged. "It's my job to know."

"And also to not know," he added, and not merely as an afterthought.

John was cock-a-hoop. "So, tell us what you *do* know, Silas. Or at least as much as you can tell us."

The old man walked over to the side of the chamber and sat down on a large, as-yet-unopened chest; one of many.

"All I know is that it's written in the same script that you were able to decipher on the plinth of the statue. The latest addition. And the first hundred pages of that book contain an illustrated key to understanding the treasury. A key to understanding the language in which the rest of the book, the *Treasury* itself, is written. Starting with a very basic vocabulary and gradually building on that. If you can figure that out – and you're a very bright and resourceful fellow – then you're half-way home."

"So what's the book about?" Holly wanted to know. "Can you tell us that much?"

"Countless moons ago, my people – yes, I think I can call them my people, or people like us – predicted times when people would stray from the path – and I don't mean one religious path or one political ideology, far from it – and things would go horribly awry. Not just for individuals or groups or townships or even nationally, but even for the whole world. When people

would lose touch with all that is Good, Beautiful and True, and fall into insanity, cruelty, and depravity."

The old man scanned their faces, lit-up as they were by the candle each of them was holding before them. "You're good, loving, caring people. You must have seen it with your own eyes and felt it in your hearts. You must know what I'm talking about."

Holly concurred, remembering the words someone had once used. "This Post-Enlightenment Era of Post-Trust, Post-Truth, Post-Rationality, Post-Honour, and Post-Chivalry," she offered.

Silas nodded in return. "Exactly, Holly. Exactly. And made all the worse by the rise of the Hive-Mind. Or, though I'm at risk of repeating myself, the ant hill or the dung heap.

"With this in mind, the elders in my tradition, who knew what we were coming to, set out in the treasury a vision of an altogether more just and harmonious way of life – and way of being, really – that they hoped future generations might adopt. In doing so, they bequeathed us a very precious gift. A truly priceless gift, in fact, that must be carefully guarded and preserved at all cost."

"A blueprint," John suggested.

Silas nodded, but it must be another old word that most people no longer understood.

"And how do I know that much about the treasury, given my failing memory?"

Holly had been about to ask the old man the same thing.

Silas tapped the left breast of his jacket, where he kept his precious notebook. "Because I have read what's been written, what's been handed down to me, every single day, until it's firmly etched in my noggin (his head). And if I forget the words, then I go back and read them, again and again and again."

The old man sighed. "And now my work here is complete."

Will drew a deep breath. "The last thing I want to do is be a party pooper, or burst anyone's balloon," he told them, "but the fact is, we're marooned on this island and sooner or later we're going to either die, or be captured and later die. This treasure, be it gold, rubies, sapphires, or this splendid book, is not going anywhere right now. And they do say that when you die, you can't take it with you."

The old man had been sitting there quietly scratching his

head after he'd finished speaking, and now he seemed to have remembered something. "There is one way off this island," he informed them, at length. "But I couldn't guarantee the safety of the gold or the jewels, or even your lives, let alone the book."

Then: "Well, for that matter, we can't guarantee their safety even if they stay on this island."

"But we do have to get away," Will pressed him, though with a gentle expression on his face that probably belied the turmoil they were all feeling deep inside.

"Then come with me, and judge for yourselves," the old man suggested, getting to his feet and already heading toward the steps. "And for now, we'd best seal the chamber back up again. And remind me to remove the mark on the paving slab."

"Hold up! Hold up!" shouted the Prof as they'd begun to ascend the ladder. "Does this mean that there's a chance of getting off this island in the relatively near future?"

"There's a chance, and a slim hope, yes," Silas called back from the top of the steps. "But there are few guarantees in life, especially in this day and age."

"Then leave me as many candles as you have," John called back. "And seal me in for now."

Of course, they all protested, but John was quite adamant.

Trust me, was all he would say, and he just would not back down.

"I'll stay in the vicinity," Rowan suggested. "In case of mishap."

"Very well," Silas agreed at length, though with some obvious reluctance. And, passing down the candles and three packs of Will's emergency rations, and leaving John a spare box of matches, that's what they did.

37. Nanny

After all his running around like a headless chicken and by now seriously fatigued, when Frampton finally arrived at the Vizier's residence, instead of being granted an immediate audience with the Vizier as he had been expecting, he was instead met by one of the senior aides, a woman by the name of Crosby. Of course, on the surface the woman was keen to show how efficient, diligent, Hive-Minded and happy to be of service she was, but beneath that surface sheen, Frampton could tell that she was annoyed at being dragged in on one of her rest days. Frampton had a nose for these things, though he also had a forgiving nature – except when it came to dealing with Crims and Dissidents – being far from perfect himself. However, he did his best to hide his own irritation. And the loss of the nectar points that he'd been expecting to harvest.

Apparently, the Vizier had been called away on urgent business, and the aide instructed him to leave the boy in her custody and to write up his report. Naturally, he protested, citing the strict instructions he had received from the Vizier, that on no account was he to surrender the boy to anyone other than the Vizier himself. The Senior aide, however, flipped through a few screens on her communicator and showed him the instructions that she had received. And there they were, in bold black lettering on a yellow background, and bearing the Vizier's hexagonal red seal, stating that she was to take custody of the boy.

The senior aide dismissed him with a courtly wave of her hand and grabbed tight hold of the boy's upper arm.

So, that was that.

But for the most part Frampton leaves our story here.

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Though Crosby would maintain her presence until relieved, she in turn placed the boy in the care of the resident Nanny who would know better than her how to handle children like the Potter boy. She wasn't an unkind person, but she did know for certain that she had not a single maternal muscle or bone in her body.

As for Nanny, she took Crosby's unannounced arrival in her
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stride, not in the least put out, and she would be only too happy to look after the boy. However, the woman did not seem overly-enthusiastic when Crosby insisted that she remain with them until the Vizier issued fresh instructions or called for the boy. Whatever: orders were orders and it was the duty of the servants to willingly comply in any and every detail.

Nanny led the way out of the entrance hall where she'd met the aide and the boy.

"I'll take you through to the nursery, young Jonathan," Nanny smiled, patting the boy on the shoulder. "But after such a long journey, you must be hungry and tired. So the first thing we'll do is go and see what Cook can find in the kitchens. And then, you can have a nice warm and relaxing bath, and if you're tired, you can have a little nap. And I've got some lovely children's books you might like to read."

The dumpy little lady looked Jonathan up and down, noting his grubby and slightly dishevelled appearance after his recent travels, and took out her communicator. "And I'll also see if we can get the nice men in Stores to rustle you up a fresh set of clothes."

"Stand still for a moment while I get your size," Nanny requested, pointing the communicator at him and capturing a full body image, before pocketing the device, clutching the boy's hand, and moving on.

A moment later, Crosby's own communicator pinged and she checked the screen. But it was just a notification to report that a known dissident, the Potter boy, had been detected on the premises. Of course, they all knew that, but she found it reassuring that the system worked so efficiently. Still, she had to respond to the prompt to indicate that she'd handled the matter.

And yet …

She stopped in her tracks for a moment. And yet the boy's presence hadn't registered when he had first entered the building with Frampton and she'd met them in the lobby. She'd have to have a word with Technical Support about that apparent lapse.

"Anything the matter, dear?" Nanny enquired, breaking her train of thought.

"Nothing that need concern you," she replied curtly with a shake of her head, before moving on. And what was with the

woman calling her “dear”? What kind of Hive-Minded person would use what was technically known as a term of endearment like that? And the boy, too, had turned his head, as if he’d also noticed the strange remark. The Vizier had mentioned that he was a very bright spark.

Crosby pursed her lips, and said nothing. But all the same she’d have one of the investigators run a psychological check on the woman. Perhaps keep tabs on her.

Of course, it was probably nothing to concern herself about, but you can’t be too careful, as her boss was forever reminding his staff.

38. The Expedition

For all his advancing years, Silas led them a merry dance through the trees and across the island. It was only now that Will realised just how vast, entangled, and largely unexplored it must be. The old man had them zigzagging back and forth all over the place. And at one particular spot he had them walk for several hundred yards along the shallow, gravel bed of a narrow stream, most likely to avoid leaving a scent. Had it been water they were after, they would have found it in abundance here. But, other than taking the opportunity to drink and re-fill their water containers, Silas had another, as yet unspecified, goal in mind.

After three hours of walking, they took a short break to ease their tired legs, so unaccustomed as they were to serious hiking, and ate some of their provisions. Then they were off again, walking on for a further hour before Silas relaxed the pace.

By now, they'd lost all sense of direction, but Silas assured them that they were not far from the south of the island. It was a little worrying that only Silas would have known the way back to the ruins where Rowan was standing guard and John was beavering away at some important task, but he had to cast that aside and concentrate on their expedition.

They'd been climbing slowly for some time and now, for the first time, they could see that they were slowly climbing up a tall hill, and as they climbed further, and the tree cover thinned out, they could see the peak of the hill ahead of them.

As they came out of the last of the trees and saw just how exposed the peak was, Will trotted after Silas. "Is it safe up there?" he wanted to know. "What if we're seen?"

Silas just tossed his head in the air and carried on walking, and he and Holly dutifully followed in his footsteps.

Finally, the climb was over and they were all gathered on the peak. They turned a full circle, taking in the panoramic view of the island.

"That way's west," Silas informed them, pointing in that direction. That's where the mainland would be, but it must still be way below the horizon and out of sight.

“And that way’s north, where the houses are.”

Will fished in his pack and brought out a pair of binoculars, but he couldn’t see any of the slate grey roofs, nor even a wisp of smoke. As for the rest: all he could see were trees on the island and blue-grey sea and the glint of the sun on some wave peaks, beyond. And, perhaps thankfully, not a boat in sight.

“Thanks,” Will nodded. “That answers my previous question and casts away any lingering doubts.”

They were not far now from the southern end of the island, and once they’d had their fill of the fresh air and sunshine, Silas led them down the other side of the hill, and, after another thirty minutes or so, they came to a cove possibly with a beach at the foot of a pretty high and steep cliff.

“And don’t worry,” the old man advised them. “The natives and the fishermen from the mainland don’t come round this side of the island. ‘There be monsters!’” he laughed.

They had to ask Silas what he meant by that and he told them that this was something written on very old maps wherever the seas had remained unexplored. They were very superstitious folks in olden days, fearful of what they still didn’t comprehend. Some of them had actually feared that if they sailed too far, they would fall off the edge of the world.

Silas led them along the top of the cliff until they came to two upright posts, firmly bashed down into the earth. They were more or less square, and pretty crudely hewn. Will took hold of one of the posts and peered over the edge, and was pleasantly surprised to see that it wasn’t a cliff after all, but a steep slope. It would have been too steep and dangerous for them to scramble down, but steps had been cut into the earth, and a manageable path zig-zagged all the way to the bottom.

Silas led the way and Will and Holly slowly and carefully followed the man down, not feeling particularly fearful of the height, but wary of losing their footing. Fortunately, the ground beneath their feet was firm after a long dry spell, and it had been liberally strewn with gravel. And the gravel looked like it had been bashed into the earth, rather than being a loose and dangerous covering.

“Did you do all this?” Holly asked the old man as he rested for a minute at one of the wide corners in the path and they

caught up with him. If he had, then that was quite a feat, though of course he would have had many years in which to slowly but surely complete this mammoth task.

"I helped out a little," Silas nodded. "And it's my job to see that the path is maintained, as best I can."

Of course that begged a further question. "Helped out?" Holly asked. "Who did you help out?"

Silas laughed. "Bright as button you are, Holly dear."

"Go on, spill the beans, Silas," she prompted.

"I'll tell you all about it once we're down and we have our breath back."

As they reached the shingle beach at the bottom, Will looked back, and he could only marvel at how the old man would manage the hard trudge back up again.

It looked like the tide was out, because there were many exposed rocks further out, to either side of the cove, covered in green slime and seaweed.

"Wouldn't go hungry here," Silas informed them. "Loads of shellfish to prise from the rocks and net in the rock pools, and good fishing, too. Leastways there used to be good fishing here. Wouldn't like to say now."

"And you could launch a boat from here," the old man continued. "If you look closely, there's a good clear channel down the middle."

Will couldn't imagine lugging the rowing boat all this way across the island. And for what purpose, exactly? He mentioned this to Silas and added, "besides which, there's a hefty gash in the boat we came in."

"Boil up some pitch and stick a few rags across the gap, and you could have that fixed in next to no time," the old man offered.

"Doh!" Will replied. "I should have thought of that. But still …"

The old man wasn't ready to give up yet. "You could easily row the thing round from the west side."

"Yes, but why? What purpose would that serve, Silas."

"You asked me about helping out."

They both nodded.

"Every year. Well, sometimes every two years, people come

to the island. On the off-chance that there are folk stranded here who need to get away. They always come see me, knowing that nothing on the island would get past me unnoticed."

Holly was particularly intrigued. "And who are these people?" she wanted to know.

Silas shrugged. "All I know about them is that they come regularly over the sea from the east, and that just as I'm custodian of the tradition, they've made it their job to look after poor souls like you. They say they're part of a network. Well, 'the Network' they calls it, with a capital 'N', not that that tells you very much. They're the ones who spread the rumours about Arcady in the first place, and who kept that knowledge alive. 'Course, that all started before the natives turned queer on us.

"They weren't always like that, you see. They used to be fine, decent folk.

"But I knew something was amiss when Mai left to live in the settlement and later married Samuel."

"Oh, gosh," gasped Holly. "Were the two of you close?"

"Mai used to be a cousin," he nodded. "But not now, after she turned queer like the others."

"And does she know about the ruins and all that?"

Will had been about to ask the same question.

The old man nodded.

"And does she know about this cove?"

"Thankfully not," he replied, bending down, fishing around in the shingle and producing a magnificent shell. "But to give her credit where credit is due, as far as I'm aware she's never once dobbed me in. Told them about me, I mean. So there's hope of redemption for her in that, and hope of survival for us."

Holly was again thinking on her feet. "And when did these people last come see you?" she wanted to know.

"They came just last month. Or maybe it was the month before. You know how it is: I don't quite remember."

Will's heart sank. "So you can expect them to be back in another ten or maybe twenty-two months."

Crikey, they could all be dead and pushing up the daisies by then, but Will didn't like to give voice to such a gloomy prospect. And he could hardly ask the old man rhetorically, "And you actually brought us all this way for this?" bless his heart.

39. The Message

Young Jonathan was fast asleep after a long and tiring day, and that awful Crosby woman had disappeared for a moment to answer the call of nature.

So Nanny Hayes took the brief opportunity this afforded to complete her short and cryptic text, then crossed her fingers for luck before hitting the [Send] button, remembering to delete the message from her outbox, and hastily pocketed her communicator. The Network would know what to do when they received her message.

When she turned round, she was shocked to see Jonathan already awake again, though not sitting up. If he'd caught a glimpse of what she was doing, he said nothing, and she hoped and prayed to dear Alicia that the boy was still too sleepy to have noticed.

"Hello, little sleepy head," she cooed, going over to gently rub her hand through Jonathan's curly brown hair. "And how would you like a nice cup of tea and a biscuit? Or some lovely hot chocolate if you'd prefer. And we can put the television on if you'd like, rather than listen to old Nanny Hayes rabbiting on. Here's the controller, so pick whatever channel suits you best."

The boy gave her one of those looks. "We're not a child, you know," he told her.

Nanny humoured the little mite. "Quite right, too, young man."

Then: "And the offer still stands. So, how's about it? Tea or hot chocolate?"

"Actually, we'd prefer cola. Our mother wouldn't allow us to drink it."

Nanny raised her eyebrows. "And what's the magic word?"

Young Jonathan thought about that for a moment, as if were searching through some dusty old filing cabinets in his attic.

Perhaps the boy wasn't sure if he was allowed to say it.

"Please," he said at length.

Nanny smiled. "Well, we're under strict instructions not to leave your side, but we'll see what we can do. With any luck,

Cook will be able to send someone with it. No promises, mind."

"Can't you just order them to bring it?" the boy wanted to know.

She shook her head. "As far as lowly nannies like us are concerned, it doesn't work that way. If they can help, then they'll be doing it as a personal favour."

40. Oh Ye of Little Faith

Will had been sitting there on a rock on the shingle beach for long enough, brooding dark and hopeless thoughts. He bent down, snatched up a handful of pebbles and flung them toward the sea.

"I know what you're thinking," old Silas said at length. "You're thinking that this old man has led you a merry dance and now he's let you down in a cruel fashion."

Will had his head back taking a swig of water and he nearly choked when he heard those words.

Holly raised his eyebrows, as if realising that she wasn't the brightest button in the tin, after all.

With an effort, the old man pushed himself to his feet and beckoned them to follow him, without really answering the big issue that he himself had exposed.

So, with nothing else to do, and not that much enthusiasm or will left to do it, they slowly followed him in his footsteps, all the way up to the top of the long flights of earthen steps.

At this point, they all had to take a few minutes time out. Their legs had demanded too much oxygen and the backs of their calves and thighs were tired and burning and in danger of cramping up.

Then, only partially recovered, they walked on away from the cliff edge and through the light woodland that graced the eastern slope of the hill.

At this point, Silas stopped and beckoned to them. "See that?" he invited them, pointing up into the trees, but apparently at nothing in particular.

Will still had his binoculars strung around his neck and he put them to his eyes, adjusted the focal length and scanned the trees.

"See anything yet?" the old man asked, taking hold of him by the shoulders and gently turning round on the spot.

And then Will saw it: a line strung high up between two of the trees. "Yes, I can," he nodded.

"Then follow it and see where it leads," Silas encouraged

him.

Thus they were led up the eastern slope of the hill until the line abruptly stopped. And then, having wandered round the other side of the last tree, Will noticed that the line did in fact continue. It was a length of thick, insulated brown wire and it had been loosely tacked all the way along one of the branches and down the trunk. Presumably the wire had been left loose so that it wouldn't come under strain and eventually snap as the trees grew. There was enough slack in the wire to allow for such growth.

"Seen it yet?" the old man asked again.

Will was down on his haunches now and he was slowly following the route that the wire took along the ground away from the tree. And then it ended. It just disappeared under the long grass at the base of the next tree.

He parted the long grass and he saw now that there was a small zinc-coloured box here, mostly covered by a layer of turf. He felt around and found a metal handle and he pulled on it, and after a bit of straining, he managed to pull the galvanised box out of the rectangular hole.

The old man was standing there, his arm resting on Holly's shoulder, and grinning from ear to ear. "Aren't you going to open it, then?"

Will quickly examined the box and found a catch. Pulling on the catch, he raised the hinged lid. Will was no electronics engineer, but when he saw the on/off switch, the indicator, the grill over a built-in speaker, and the microphone, he realised immediately that this was a radio. No shit, Sherlock, as Holly would have remarked. And the brown wire must have been a long aerial. There was no cable, of course, so it must have been battery-powered.

"If you're in trouble, all you have to do is call them, and they'll come pick you up, so they told me," the old man smiled.

"It looks very old," Will remarked. "And it must run on a battery. What if it's dead?"

Holly, who had been hopping up and down on the spot as soon as Silas had revealed its purpose, and had embraced the old man in her delight, suddenly had a worried look on her face and stopped stock still.

"Oh ye of little faith," Silas said, coming across and patting

him on the back. “It may be an old wireless set, but whenever they come, they always make sure they change the battery. And they’ve only been gone a month or two.”

Then he added, “And they tell me those newfangled batteries are designed to keep most of their charge for as long as ten years. So quit your fretting, youngster.”

There were tears in Holly’s eyes now, and before long, Will and even the old man had joined her. She didn’t tell them that half the tears were tears of joy, while the other half were tears of sadness, having been reminded yet again of her beloved Jonathan.

“How can we ever thank you?” Holly asked Silas, once they’d recovered from the excitement and regained their composure.

Silas drew a deep breath. “As my ole Granpop would advise on such occasions: don’t count your chickens until they’ve hatched.”

Will puffed out his cheeks. “In fact maybe don’t count them until you’ve taken them to market and sold them.”

“Sound advice,” echoed Holly. “So, what now?”

Silas thought for a time and consulted the sky. “Well, we won’t be able to make it back before it gets dark, so all we can do is find ourselves shelter among the bushes in the woods and spend the night, then set off back to the others first thing tomorrow morning. Maybe as early as the false dawn.”

“So, we don’t use the radio until we’re all assembled here again, I presume. Unless we could guarantee that we’d be around by the time help arrived, and I don’t think we can be one hundred percent certain of that.”

“That’s right. Best play safe. And then you’d have to give them maybe a week to get organised and make the voyage. So you’d have to make camp here or down on the beach.”

Silas was back on his feet again and ready to be off, and Will very carefully closed up the box, pushed the radio back down into the hole, and covered it over again.

“Anyhow, the sooner we can get the four of you away from this place, the better.”

41. A Walk in the Park

Meanwhile, back in the capital, rather than have the Potter boy brought before him as he'd first proposed, which he could see now would probably have been fruitless for him and mere gob-smacking and overwhelming spectacle for the boy, the Vizier had instead decided, partly on the advice of this Nanny Hayes, to give the boy time to settle in and acclimatise, and to simply observe him at a discreet distance. She was no slouch, this Nanny woman, though she was diminutive in stature, grossly overweight, and perhaps past her use-by date for most other Hive occupations. But as a Nanny she was ideally suited to the task, he was told. And so he had listened to her when she'd advised a more "softly, softly" approach, at least for the time being. What was the phrase the woman had used? He'd run it past Thelma, the AI assistant, and drawn a blank. He had to replay the video footage to remind himself. Ah, yes: "Softly, softly, catchee monkey". He got the gist of it, and perhaps that was enough. Thelma had offered one perhaps tangentially related thought, however, and that was "good cop, bad cop", which he could more easily comprehend. Definitely something to consider at a later point.

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So today, Nanny was taking Jonathan on a merry little walk through the Royal park and he seemed to particularly delight in feeding the ducks. Perhaps that brought back memories of his younger childhood, before his formal education and training began and the indoctrination, which she referred to as Operation Mindwarp, kicked in. She did try to get him to talk about his childhood, but he seemed reluctant, and she didn't press the issue. Right now, he was mostly interested in what he was experiencing in the here and now, the sights and sensations occurring before his eyes.

She'd also promised the boy a vanilla and chocolate ice cream, too, at the end of the walk, providing that he behaved himself, as he had promised to do. And he was clearly thinking ahead about that.

At one point, Jonathan had spotted a couple of older men
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sitting there in the park playing a game of chess, and he grabbed hold of Nanny's hand and dragged her across the grass to watch. One of them, Major Thackery (retired), she recognised. The other man was a stranger. They watched as the Major moved his queen. At least she presumed it must be a queen, and the other man clutched his head in his hands, cried out "What in blue blazes?!", toppled his own king, and stood up, offering Thackery his hand, and briskly marched away.

Jonathan slipped out of Nanny's hand and dashed over to take the vacant seat, and without so much as a "by your leave", he started setting up his black pieces. The Major greeted the boy with a courteous "Good morning", which at least Jonathan was courteous enough to respond to, the Major made the first move, and battle commenced.

As the game progressed, she could see the Major becoming more and more anxious and, sweat trickling down his face, he had to take out his handkerchief and mop his brow. Ten minutes later and it was his turn to concede. He stood up and bowed to young Jonathan, then he turned to Nanny who was standing nearby, marvelling at a spectacle that she only partially understood.

"Nanny Hoyle," if we recall correctly. "We never forget a face, but we're not so good on names."

"Nanny Hayes," she smiled. "We once took care of one of your nieces. And you would be Major Thackery."

"More like Minor Thackery," the man half laughed and half gasped. "We've just had a junior moment. Bested by a youngster."

He leant a little closer and confided. "It was as if he knew our every move even before we'd thought of it ourselves."

"Is that just a gallant way of saying you let the boy win?" she queried.

"Not on your life, Nanny," he replied, wide-eyed. "We had to dig deep and gave it everything we had, by Jove.

"Nanny Hayes, we think you have a child prodigy here."

By this time, Jonathan had sauntered over to stand by her side. "I'm not a child," he retorted adamantly.

"Quite right, young man," she agreed, ignoring the boy's forthright behaviour and impudence for now, but noting his inappropriate and jarring use of the word "I". Then again, it was

an easy slip to make in the heat of the moment, and it did have her thinking.

She nodded her head and nudged the boy's shoulder. "And good day to you, Major Thackery."

"Thank you, and good day to you, Major," he responded semi-respectfully after a few moments' thought, and they continued on their way, as the old major tipped the brim of his hat in respect, still in a state of awe.

And this from a seasoned veteran who'd probably eaten grown men for breakfast in his long and distinguished career, no less.

As for Jonathan, it was as if rather than pick these social niceties and complexities up by intuitive "feel", the boy had to be prompted and had to somehow work out the rules of engagement for himself. Of course, if he'd been brought up in a dissident family with their own peculiar ways, perhaps he was left feeling like a fish out of water, or a round block faced with a square hole.

Later that day, as they settled in front of a glowing fire after their evening meal, Nanny thought she'd try her hand at an experiment of her own devising. Snap was her sort of level, so she brought out a pack of playing cards, gave them a rudimentary shuffle, explained the rules to him, dealt out the cards, and quickly laid out the first card.

For a time, neither of them correctly called out a matching pair, and the pile in the centre grew thicker and thicker.

Then all of a sudden, before she'd even seen the card she was about to drop herself, he called out loudly and quite forcefully "Snap!"

As she dropped the card, and she saw that it did indeed match, he scooped up the heap. And, almost needless to say, he called every single subsequent match, and within minutes she had run out of cards to drop, and he was quite rightly declared the winner.

Nanny bit the bullet. "You remember earlier you asked why we didn't order the kitchen staff to bring you a cola. And we told you that, for the likes of lowly nannies and servants like us, that's not how it works."

The boy nodded.

"You see, as well as being work colleagues, we're sort of

friends. Maybe not the closest of friends, but friends nevertheless. Working together, we have to get along with one-another. For the Greater Good, if you like, but also for our own, mutual good. And so we do each other favours, we guess you could say. Well, more than that, we help others out of the goodness of our heart, without even thinking in terms of a transaction like 'You scratch our back and we'll scratch yours', and without keeping count of who owes what, though if someone has done us a big favour, then we like to return that favour whenever possible at some time in the future. So it's not so much something we think about in our heads, but more of something we feel in our hearts. Does that make sense to you?"

Young Jonathan was listening intently, and she could almost hear the cogs and pistons clanking in his little left brain as he took it all in and worked on it, but he remained silent.

"Of course there will always be some selfish people, wherever you go, and at every level of society from the humble kitchen maid right up to the Queen herself, and even beyond, if you believe that sort of thing. But no, we do it simply because it's the right thing, or the necessary thing, or the kind thing, to do. Ideally, we do it out of love, and for love, without thought for our own selfish wants and desires, though in the realisation that none of us are perfect. And we do mean none of us, at every level of society, and in spite of superficial appearances, clever marketing, or even subterfuge, that suggests the contrary."

She paused for a moment.

"What we've told you has a wider meaning, of course, but you're perhaps wondering why we should mention it now. Well, it's just that playing games is a cooperative thing at its heart, even if in one sense it's competitive, and it should be an enjoyable pastime. Enjoyable for you and enjoyable for whoever you're playing with, and for anybody who's watching you play. So there's a friendly, dynamic balance that you have to keep."

"You mean if you win every game," he queried as she paused to consider what she might say next.

Nanny nodded. "Yes. It wouldn't be much fun for other people if you won every single time. But please don't get us wrong, we'm not saying that you should deliberately lose, either. There's nothing wrong with winning as long as you play fairly

and give the other person or people a chance to win. You know, it's actually part of the fun seeing someone else win. You can be happy for them."

Jonathan sucked his finger for a few moments before replying. "You mean we should turn off our abilities."

She shrugged.

"We're not in a position to really understand what makes you different from other boys and girls, or adults, Jonathan, but you clearly have some kind of – what can we call it? – let's say special gifts. Things that other people don't have, at least not at your level. Then again, perhaps they have gifts that are sleeping or undeveloped or that they're not consciously aware of."

The boy put down his pack of playing cards and looked a little sad. "But Nanny, and perhaps we should say sorry, we don't know how to switch it off."

She smiled and leant across the little occasional table to pat him gently on the arm. "Don't worry about that. Maybe we can find someone who can teach you to take conscious control over these special abilities."

"You mean like the Vizier? If he won't come to us, then perhaps it's time for us to go to see him."

And by "us", he meant himself.

Nanny Hayes could have kicked herself. That's not exactly who she had in mind. In fact, it would be a whole lot better if Jonathan kept these matters to himself, especially when meeting with people like the Vizier.

But she wasn't at all sure whether confiding in young Jonathan about such matters would be the wise thing to do. Perhaps she'd already said too much. And more than her counselling him, she was in dire need of counselling herself.

"You're different," the boy said as he deftly split and shuffled the cards. And the way he said it, she couldn't be sure whether that was a good thing or bad.

Either way, she knew for certainty that she'd been rumbled, and he was the one holding all the cards.

42. Back Again

It was gone midday by the time they made it back to the ruins, to find that the flagstone was firmly back in place, the white chalk “X” had been erased, and no sign of Rowan or John. Rather than call out, and perhaps attract unwanted attention, they headed on down toward the camp.

Rowan and John weren’t there, either, but Will saw that the campfire was still warm, one or two embers were still faintly glowing, and it looked like a fresh load of driftwood and deadwood had been piled beside the hearth.

Instead, then, they decided to check the beach where they’d originally pulled in and left the boat. Alas, however, Rowan and John weren’t there, either.

Finally, just as they were about to call out and begin a wider search, Rowan and John came out from behind some tall bushes.

“Sorry about that,” Rowan greeted them. “After a long stint at the ruins, after we’d fixed something to eat, and a hot drink, we thought maybe we’d better get a good wash before our clothes started crawling away in disgust. As you can see, we washed our clothes at the same time. But when we heard someone coming, we thought we’d better lay in wait in case it wasn’t you.”

“So, was the expedition a success?” John wanted to know.

“Long story,” Holly advised them, “and no doubt you also have lots to tell us, so let’s head back to camp, we’ll grab some food, and we can fill one-another in with the details.”

“Coffee’s just about run out,” John sighed. “And we’d have gone foraging, but we really need Will along to tell us what’s edible and what’s not. We did get a heap of blackberries, though.”

Holly shrugged. “Not to worry, we can sort something out.” Says she, knowing full well that they’d already finished off the soup and all the other canned food, too. Fortunately, Will still had a big bag full of dried pasta, though it could really do with some kind of sauce. “Beggars can’t be choosers,” she added.

So, while Will related his part of the story, Holly set to lighting the fire. She’d paid careful attention to the way Will worked, and it couldn’t be that hard. Or could it? It took two

fumbled attempts before she had the fire going. Silas, too, had taken the hint and went off to see what food he could find.

You could guess which part of the story Will had got to by the groans and, later, the whoops of delight, and by that time, Silas had returned, and after some preparation, cooking commenced.

So, while the vegetables were bubbling away on the fire, it was Rowan and John's turn to tell their tale, and it was short and sweet.

Rowan shrugged. "Nothing for me to tell, really, other than standing guard through the day and keeping one eye open for intruders or nosy critters during the night, while John beavered away. He worked a twelve hour stretch before hollering to be released the chamber, and clambering out. Over to you, John."

The Prof looked quite pleased with himself. "Well, first of all I found some pieces of clean, dry silk material so I could safely handle the book," he told them.

"And being the curious type, I had a quick scan through a few of the introductory pages and came away little the wiser, though I could see that given time, I could gradually learn how to work through the first section of the books. Those are designed to help the reader begin to learn the language that the actual *Treasury* is written in.

"Of course, I couldn't afford to spend much time on that, but I had to satisfy my curiosity and get a feel for the book.

"My main task, however, is what took up the rest of the time: painstakingly photographing the front cover, back, and spine; a hundred pages of introduction; and a further two hundred and fifty pages of the real meat, the treasury itself."

"Gosh. That's a lot of work, Prof," Holly noted.

"What's worse is that half way through the treasury, the battery on my phone had almost run out."

"Oops."

"I would have borrowed Rowan's, of course, but his was nearly empty, too."

"Double oops."

"However, in view of the importance of the work, Rowan let me charge the phone by hooking it up to his Disrupter using a charging lead. That took some time, but it did allow me to

complete the work."

"Well done, that man!" Holly enthused.

"That's the good news," Rowan chipped-in.

"And the bad news?" she queried.

"Instead of five remaining blasts from the Disrupter, we're now down to just two."

"The work I completed is very important, though," Prof added, a little defensively. "You see, I'd already decided that it would be unsafe to carry the book with us. I really do think it should stay safely tucked away on the island, at least for the time being, now that we have a faithful facsimile of it."

"Yes, that makes sense," Holly agreed. "And thank you for your sterling work."

"Well, it was either that or me staying put on the island while you sailed off into the sunset."

Holly raised her eyebrows. "Wow, you really would have stayed behind?"

"Yes," John nodded. "Just as Silas has his duties, so have I."

Holly went over to stir the pot and check the vegetables for tenderness. When she returned, she turned to Silas.

"And what about you, dear Silas?"

Will had been wondering about that, too, and it was his turn to chip in. "You said, and I quote: 'the sooner we can get the four of you away from this place, the better.'"

Again, Holly nodded, and already there was a sadness growing in her eyes. "Yes, you said four and not five."

Silas gave out a long sigh. "Even in the short time I've known you, I've already grown fond of each of you," he began. "But as we are all too well aware, I'm not getting any younger. And I'm still a custodian of the tradition. Thankfully not the only one now, dear Professor John.

"I'm also a creature of habit. And I'm no longer well suited to so-called civilisation." He laughed. "... If I ever was. You're all still young and with long and fruitful lives ahead of you, and Professor John has a monumental and momentous task ahead of him: to decipher and translate the *Treasury*, and then to disseminate it far and wide, so that it will never again be lost. It would be folly to leave the treasury unattended in the chamber, and double folly to keep both the treasury and the photographs

together."

Holly and Will hadn't forgotten the old saying about counting their chickens, and she reminded the others, adding, "And don't carry all your eggs in the same basket."

"Exactly," the old man concurred.

Again, he sighed. "All of which is a long-winded way of saying that I need to stay here, and I wish you a safe journey, until we meet again."

"But you will see us off," Holly asked, although she already knew the answer.

Silas beamed. "'Course I will, my lovelies. You'll need my help to get there, and I wouldn't miss it for the world. Don't worry, I'll be there to wave you off."

Rowan chewed on his thumbnail. "Well, we need to get off soon. Would tomorrow morning be too soon?"

He scanned the four of them and they were all in agreement.

"Sooner the better," Silas replied.

"So, do we fix the boat and row round to the east side of the island, or do we go on another long hike?" he wanted to know.

"Let's fix the boat today, using some of the pitch we found in the chamber," Will offered. "And we'll defer making that decision until bright and early tomorrow morning."

"Assuming it is bright as well as early," Silas suggested. "I think there's some bad weather coming. I can feel it in my bones. And you can tell by the feel of seaweed if you leave it hanging up. It's not hard and crispy anymore."

"Well, it gives us options, doesn't it," Rowan offered. "Okay, then: Will and I will go back to the chamber to fetch some pitch, and then we'll all go down to the beach and fix up the boat. Pity we hadn't thought of this before, but there you go. Then maybe we should think about taking an early night, so we're all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed tomorrow morning."

"Actually, I'd best go and collect more wood," Silas suggested. "And then I'll get the pitch nicely heated up and bubbling. I'm hoping it will still be hot enough by the time I get it to the beach. Should be, if we have a pan full. Of course, you won't be able to use the pan for food after that."

"Okay," said Rowan, clapping his hands together. "Let's get to work, guys."

Holly could feel the tears welling up in her eyes at that moment, and she hastily rose to her feet and strode across the camp, on the pretence of searching for some scraps of material to bind with the pitch and seal the ragged hole in the boat.

By now, tears were streaming down her face, and she tried to brush them aside, but they just kept coming, as if a dam had burst behind her eyeballs.

There wasn't a single day, often not a single hour, that went by without her thoughts turning to poor Jonathan. Especially at night, when such thoughts got a look in. During the day she tried hard, desperately hard at times, to brush aside her anxiety and concern, and somehow muddle through without letting the others know, but it was a hard and cruel task she'd set herself.

She was kneeling in the entrance to one of the tents when Rowan came up behind her and playfully slapped her on the backside. She could have ignored it, of course, or pretended to laugh it off. But instead, and quite without willing it, she staggered to her feet, turned round to face Rowan, clutched him tightly and buried her head in his chest. Crying out loud and unashamedly, she let all her pent-up emotion out, and Rowan stood there, a rock of a man, and held her tightly in his arms. And when she looked up, she didn't need to ask how he was feeling, for she could see it written plainly in his features and in his own eyes. It must have been hard for him, too, when they'd had to drag her away to safety at the quayside, because beneath that rugged exterior she could clearly feel a strongly beating heart of gold.

43. Calculations

Jonathan was outside in the garden, but not beyond calling distance, chatting to Hector, the Head Gardener, who was busily sprucing up the flowery borders that ran around the building, so Nanny Hayes had a few minutes to herself.

She was wary of using the word “calculating”, because that might give the impression that she thought young Jonathan was cold and sociopathic. She was not at all looking forward to writing her report, though that dreadful Crosby woman had been pestering her. She should, of course, mention the boy’s special talents and depth of character. Not knowing what had already been reported about him, if she omitted such details, that would not look good for her, and she’d lose a considerable number of nectar points.

Perhaps the Network would be able to advise her, or even take the matter out of her hands, but there was no news from them as yet, and time was pressing.

Having said that, it was the boy’s welfare that was more important than her own blessed reputation. She could feign ignorance and simple grin and bear any subsequent fallout. After all, what was she? Just another tiny, grinding, dispensable and easily replaceable cog in the Hive’s machinery.

But as for the boy, he wouldn’t see a minute’s peace for the rest of his life. He’d be sent for testing and psychological analysis, without a doubt, and they’d prod him and poke around inside his head, inject him with noxious chemicals, collect his stool samples, and heaven knows what else. Pushed, filed, stamped, indexed, briefed, debriefed, and numbered, there would be no end to the torment and the demands made of him.

At that moment someone entered the room, breaking her chain of thought.

It was Crosby, and she had the boy in tow.

Nanny Hayes sighed. She came forward and prised the woman’s fingers from Jonathan’s upper arm. “Would it really hurt to treat the child – this young man – with a little tenderness?”

She said that, but of course she knew that in that woman’s

cold heart such things would not register, and in her thick skull, they would not compute. And at that moment she realised, for certain, that she would have to do her damnedest to look after the poor boy's best interests.

A flicker of a smile crossed Crosby's lips, and Nanny knew straight away that this was not inappropriate amusement, but sheer malice.

"You're to come with us," the woman requested curtly, her hand already reaching for the door.

"I'll just get my bag," she replied, her own heart beating an anxious tattoo in her chest, for no apparent reason. Perhaps she sensed Crosby's animosity toward her. Or maybe she was just like that with everyone. There was a special place in Hell reserved for such people.

"You won't be needing that," the woman retorted, opening the door, pushing Jonathan out into the corridor, and summoning Nanny.

Crosby's face said it all: she'd either have to go quietly and voluntarily, or else she would be dragged out, kicking and screaming, by the burly guard standing attentively close-by.

44. Reinforcements

Reinforcements had arrived unexpectedly, and Special Investigator Morrison had mixed feelings about this. The search thus far had yielded nothing other than the burnt-out and scattered remnants of a couple of very old camp fires. But now, there were another ten men and a couple of very eager looking sniffer dogs.

That was the good news.

The bad news was that one of the new men, Franklin, came with orders from on-high. Though Morrison was still nominally in charge, this new guy, who was apparently an experienced guide and tracker, would be leading the search, and he was to be afforded the greatest respect and cooperation. Well, cooperation was one thing, thought Morrison. As for respect, that had to be earned.

The new men had brought a lot of equipment with them, too, so rather than having to return to the inn every evening and start from scratch the next day, they'd be making camp each day and probing further and further into the interior of the island.

Franklin had what looked like an old map with him, too. Where he got a thing like that from, Morrison had no idea. It greatly surprised him that the island had ever been surveyed. But there you go. Someone, somewhere, most likely in the capital had pulled a rare and valuable rabbit out of their hat, or at least from some musty, cobweb-strewn archive.

He had been expecting that the new team would want to settle in at the inn first, but no such luck: they were to begin their search immediately, as soon as the dogs had been fed and watered and the men had donned their packs.

45. Early the Next Morning

Morning came all too soon and Holly shuffled round in bed. Rowan still had his arms around her, as he must have had all night. She would have given anything to have made love to him at that moment, he was so close to her and so warm, but she knew that right now she should be outside getting the fire going and cooking up a makeshift breakfast with whatever food Silas had been able to find. Hell, she'd miss that dear old friend. Perhaps one day, they'd meet again. If not in this lifetime, then perhaps in the next. Most of all, though ... well, she didn't need to spell that out.

Instead, she slipped out of the bed before she had second thoughts or fell asleep again, and only when she was fully dressed and wrapped up did she bend down and gently arouse Rowan. She had a quiet chortle to herself. The word was rouse, not arouse.

Outside, Will was already up and he had the fire going, and Silas was there, too, preparing root vegetables. And there was fish by his side, too, so he must have been busy after the rest of them had returned to camp, bless his cotton socks.

A thought occurred to her just then, that while they were taking away Silas's gift of the treasury, and their freedom, for that matter, she had nothing to give him in return. Well, apart from her love and warm wishes and fond memories. And there was a sadness to this, too, because if they ever did make it back to the island again, she was worried that the dear old man might no longer remember them.

They'd just finished breakfast when Silas came running back to the camp, his arms waving wildly in the air, and they all jumped to their feet. Instantly Rowan reached for his disrupter and released the safety catch.

"You have to go!" the man cried out breathlessly as he ran toward them.

"Now?" asked John, as ever with a notepad in his hand.

"Yes, I mean now," Silas gasped, leaning forward and bracing himself with his hands on his thighs. "Right now."

Rowan was thinking fast. “Which way?”

Silas looked to the sky, but he already knew the answer to that. “The weather’s not looking so good, but you’ll have to take the boat.”

Again, he had to pause to catch his breath. “I’ll lead them a merry dance.”

“Who’s them?” John wanted to know.

“Pohlees, with tracker dogs. And it looks they have an experienced guide with them. Rough-looking fellah.”

John cast his arms about him. “But the tents.”

Silas shook his head. “No time for that. Just grab your packs and blankets and make a dash for it. Right now.”

At least they’d had the sense to pack most of the stuff away.

As they hastily gathered up a few more things, Silas was already staggering away from the camp and into the trees.

Holly was about to call out a farewell to the man, but he was already gone, the brief opportunity was lost, and they had to move like the wind, with the very Hounds of Hell on their heels.

46. Disgrace

Crosby marched them briskly off down the corridor, half-dragging young Jonathan along by the arm, Nanny Hayes almost having to trot along to keep up with the woman's long legs and grim determination, and with the guard marching along behind them and occasionally jabbing her in the small of the back with his cattle prod. Fortunately, that barbaric tool was not switched on.

One of the kitchen staff was coming in the opposite direction and, seeing that Crosby looked like she was on some urgent mission, she stepped aside and stood near one of the windows to allow them clear passage.

Of course, Cathy had seen her, and must have noticed her pallor and the worried expression furrowing her brow. They made the briefest eye contact but said nothing, nor showed one-another the slightest sign of recognition.

"Don't just stand there gawping, girl," Crosby snapped as they passed. "Get on with your work!"

"Y-yes, Ma'am. S-sorry, Ma'am," the girl stammered, and she scurried away down the corridor.

"For heaven's sake, woman, she was just getting out of your way. Being polite and respectful."

Crosby stopped and spun round on the spot to face her. "Now let's get one thing straight, Hayes. If I want your opinion, then I shall give it to you."

And with that, the woman turned on her heel and marched on, and again Nanny felt the pointed end of the guard's cattle prod in the small of her back.

Hayes, too. Not Nanny Hayes, nor even Nanny. It was all very dismissive and did not bode at all well. And who the hell gave that foul excuse for a woman the right to order the domestic staff about? In normal circumstances, she would have reported the matter to the Head Housekeeper, and rightly so. But of course, these were far from ordinary circumstances.

As for Jonathan. Well, it wasn't even that the jury was out on that one. They hadn't as yet seen any evidence. Indeed, no

charges had as yet been brought. Not that minor details like that would bother Crosby in the slightest. All the same, she would be deeply disappointed if Jonathan had played some part in this, having placed such trust in the boy. If only she'd been afforded the time, she could have straightened him out. Or unstraightened him, more like.

They were off down a third corridor, and then on through a door leading outside and across the square in the direction of either the Vizier's office or the Queen's throne room and chambers. It was a toss up. Either way, Nanny knew by now that she was in big trouble.

Oh, if only she had an inkling of who had said what, when and where, then she could have been working on some plausible excuse.

Over on the other side of the square, they climbed the wide steps, passed through the open double doors, and crossed the polished marble floor of the entrance hall, its high, vaulted ceiling designed to inspire awe and wonder, and not least instil a sense of just how small and insignificant they all were, especially lowly nannies like her.

Having walked down the centre of the entrance hall, almost as far as the highly-polished rosewood reception desk, Crosby turned smartly to the left. That could mean only one thing: they were heading for the Vizier's offices. Under normal circumstances, one of the Vizier's aides would have handled most matters, but given the Vizier's obvious and special interest in the boy, he might want to handle this himself. And, casting aside the minor intimidation that the Crosby woman presented, that grim prospect sent an ice-cold shiver through Nanny Hayes.

Please don't forsake me now, dear Alicia, she cried out in anguish, deep inside. As for the Network, she was perhaps beyond such mortal help. No doubt they'd receive word from Cathy, who was a bright enough young woman, but most likely all too late. If she were Cathy, she'd make a run for it that very day.

They turned off the main corridor leading to the Vizier's offices and down a narrower passageway, past a row of heavy metal doors. One of them was open and Crosby signalled to the guard, who manhandled Nanny, relieving her of her jacket and

even her shoes, thrust her inside and, without a further word being spoken, slammed the door-to behind her.

So, that was that. She glanced around the whitewashed cell. It was almost bare, with just a thin mattress on the floor to the right, a red plastic bucket in the corner for obvious and insanitary reasons, a beaker without any visible means of filling it, and an annoyingly flickering bright light embedded in the ceiling.

Nanny had been left alone, and she could only assume that they were giving her time to slowly stew in her own juices. Soften her up for whatever foul deeds lay ahead. And she was worried, too, by what they might have in mind for Jonathan. Poor mite, he probably had less idea of what the Vizier and his type were capable of than she did, and he was in for a very rude awakening.

47. The Network

Word soon reached the Network.

A slim, elegant and stylishly dressed middle-aged woman, Rosalie Muller took a final sip of tea and placed the cup gently back on its saucer as she read the report. It was short, brutally to the point, and most urgent. The Director, Tenzing, was of course a great many miles away at Babs Chu, the mountain retreat, and he could only be contacted indirectly by a message relayed via Wilbur Jones, the radio operator at Shakra.

But today, back at the Network's rural study centre, Foxholes, the message had landed on her desk, and she had to take charge.

As yet they had few details to go on. Sally Hayes, one of their operatives in the far-flung capital, Avilys in what was now Kvinslandia, had been arrested by the authorities. Reason unknown. Current whereabouts and status equally unknown. Rosalie pulled up the records on her computer. Their contact, a young woman by the name of Cathy Morris was apparently in the employ of the regime and worked in the kitchens, not that far from the palace, in Avilys. But given her position she was unable to supply any more intelligence, at least not in the immediate future, and she wanted to know whether she should stay at her post or flee for fear of being discovered.

Oh, Alicia. Decisions, decisions. Tenzing would know what to do in a flash, of course, but she wasn't at his elevated level. And yet, what had he always told her? Trust in your own innate resources, Rosalie Muller. Nevertheless, he'd have to be kept fully informed.

Of course, her co-deputy, Harold Grainger had spent quite some time in Kvinslandia, though long after the regime, the Hive, first came to power, and he'd been involved in setting up a beachhead there, so he could well advise.

"George?" she called through to the adjacent office and a ginger-headed young man popped his head round the open door.

"Be a dear and fetch Mister G would you. He'll be in a lesson, but drag him out. And check in the staff room to see if

anyone can cover for him. In fact, find out what classes he's booked down for later today and just dismiss the students for the day."

Grabbing a copy of the timetables, George was away through the main building in a dash. She could always rely on young George; he was always such an eager beaver.

And while that was happening, she went into the system to see what they knew about Kvinslandia. It was one place she'd never been, and judging by reports in recent years, it was not exactly the Network's favourite holiday destination.

She clicked on one of the images to show an enlarged map. So she was in the so-called Freelands, some miles outside the metropolis of Sher Point. North of that was the Outlands, or Hodweir as it was officially known. The Outlands was the bitter legacy of the last war and it was a derogative term used, ironically enough, by outsiders.

And north again was Kvinslandia, with an ocean to the east, far wider than the sea between the Freelands and the mountainous land of Narayana, Tenzing's homeland.

She also noted, in passing, that there was also a small, unnamed blob off the east coast of Kvinslandia, which was presumably an island. But quite why that should have attracted her attention for a moment, she couldn't say, and she quickly dismissed the thought.

As for Narayana, that lay to the south-east of Kvinslandia, separated from it by league upon league of ocean (and due east of the Freelands). So, if an infiltration were necessary, should they mount a land-based operation up north from the Freelands, or by sea north-west from Narayana? And back again if there was an extraction. Of course they had more material resources in the Freelands, but more resourcefulness, nous and inspired action in the Director, Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen, in Narayana.

Harold Grainger entered the office at that moment, so the first thing to do was get a briefing from him and see what ideas he might come up with, and then relay a detailed message to Tenzing and await his considered response.

48. Dire Straits

As Holly stood watch not far from the bushes, Will and Rowan tipped the heavy boat back over and began to haul it down toward the beach while John followed on behind with the oars.

She distinctly heard the crack of gunfire, somewhere deep in the trees, but it wasn't the sort of noise a disrupter would make, it was a loud crack, like a small explosion. So this surely wouldn't be Enforcers. And then she distinctly hear the shrill sound of a whistle being blown. Presumably that was a call to summon and gather the troops. So they must have found something. Or someone.

The guys had the boat down near the water's edge now, so she sprinted through the grass and onto the beach.

"Jump in the front," Rowan called urgently to John as he helped push the boat fully into the water.

He and Will were next, leaving her to jump in last and handle the tiller, as they swung the oars round and dropped them in the u-shaped oarlocks.

She could hear the whistle again, a second and third loud bang, and the awful barking of dogs that brought on an almost primeval fear.

Rowan and Will had some difficulty rowing in the water, but finally they were clear of the shallows and they pulled on the oars with all their might.

Just as they reached the more southerly spur of this little inlet, but not as yet out of range, they caught sight of one of the dogs, and then a second, barking away down by the water's edge, but fortunately they were out of sight before their weary handlers caught up.

Still rowing like crazy, Will glanced anxiously up at the sky, to the north. He didn't say anything, but Holly knew that bad weather must be on the way, and she could already feel a cold bite to the wind as they came out from the relative shelter of the inlet and out onto the ocean.

John had his pencil and notepad out and he was busy scribbling in his notepad. "Four miles an hour, tops," he called to

them. “Maybe fifteen miles to the southern point of the island, then another ten miles round the southern end and back up to the cove, if what you told me is correct.”

He scribbled some more in the notepad. “Twenty-five divided by four. That’s over six hours, though the wind behind us will no doubt help for most of the journey.

“And of course, we may have to fight it going round the far end and back up the east side.

“Let’s say eight hours and give ourselves some leeway. Seven o’clock now, near enough.

“That means we should be safe and sound and hopefully getting warmed-up by mid-afternoon.”

Holly was performing her own calculations. If they could only make two miles an hour for the last ten miles, that would take nine or ten hours in total. And seven plus ten would make landfall around late afternoon. She pondered for a moment whether she should share her findings or just keep her lips zipped up, but in the end, she decided to speak up.

John double-checked. “Worst case scenario – well, one of the worst – we get there before dark.”

Holly didn’t dare ask John what might be worse than ten hours bobbing up and down in a rowing boat. But even before they’d reached the southern tip of the island, the wind had picked up, the boat was swaying about so much that she began to feel seasick, and even the resourceful Will didn’t have any remedies in his otherwise ubiquitous survival kit. After a while, there was only one thing for it, lean over the side of the boat, hoping to avoid splattering the others who were downwind, and heave her guts up. And that set John off, too, poor sod.

49. Request More Info

Holly had spoken at length to Harold Grainger and one of the first things he'd offered was to travel to Kvinslandia himself. He knew someone there in Avilys and within walking distance of the palace, a good friend and field operative, though now retired, who would be more than happy to put him up as a lodger for a time. Harold was no youngster, of course, and he'd put on a bit of weight, but that was indeed a very tempting option. She'd relayed a message Tenzing, too, but as yet had received no reply.

In the meantime, she'd sent a message to Cathy Morris reluctantly advising her to remain at her post. To make a run for it would attract all the wrong attention and would probably place her in far greater jeopardy.

And she also requested more information, even what might appear to be trivial details, as long as that wouldn't further engender her.

So, for the moment, all she could do was anxiously await further developments.

For his part, Harold Grainger had gone off to pack a suitcase and fill up his car and the spare cans he kept in the boot, so that he could make an early start if he was called upon to make the journey up north. After waiting tensely for an hour and still not having heard from Tenzing, Rosalie followed her inner urges and, thinking that perhaps time was of the essence, she sent young George off to give Harold the go-ahead. And if things went pear-shaped, then on her head be it.

50. Round the Cape

As it turned out, the leg of the journey round the southern tip of the island, the cape, wasn't too bad, though their enthusiasm was drained a little when it started to rain. They were actually in the shelter of the island here, and the high hill, which they could by now make out, probably helped, too. But Rowan and Will were tired by now, and they had to take a breather; still rowing, but for a time at a more leisurely pace. They had to do that for fear of being swept away from the island.

John had the pack with the remaining food in it. They were down to Will's emergency rations now, and they only had four packs left. The rations, including the ones that they'd already consumed, would have lasted one man a week, but there were four of them, so they'd only last a day.

Holly didn't eat hers as she was still feeling quite sick, and John also refrained. Later, she would instead give Rowan and Will her share, because they were doing all the hard work, and without those two, none of them would live to tell the tale.

Of course, back at the beach, it wouldn't take their pursuers long to realise that they'd either headed off further south or decided to chance the long row back to the mainline, a feat that only madmen would contemplate taking. But right now, that was an added worry that would have to bide its time.

51. More Information

Thankfully, it wasn't long before Cathy Morris got back to Rosalie, taking time out during her lunch hour. She'd already worked out pretty much what she had to say, anticipating Rosalie's request for further information.

Sally Hayes hadn't confided in her about the boy, but she had noticed that one of the Vizier's senior aides – Crosby, she thought her name was – had a particular and unusual interest in him, and he was with the senior aide when Sally was being arrested. Since then, all she'd heard was gossip, but it was said that they were holding Sally in the cells near the Vizier's offices.

But then, Cathy had reported a remarkable thing. Just as Sally Hayes and the boy were being escorted down the corridor by the aide and one of the guards, she could have sworn that she heard him speak quite clearly to her, though he couldn't have done that because she was the only one to hear his words, "Tell Holly and Rohan that I'm sorry", and she'd swear that his lips didn't move. "Those aren't names that Hive-Minded people would use; they're the sort of old-fashioned names that the dissidents call themselves, secret names that they wouldn't even dare use in front of their own children, out of a very real fear of betrayal. That's what it's like living here, only ten times, a hundred times, as bad as that."

"What the boy said meant nothing to me," the lady had reported, concluding her message, "and he must have known that. But there it is, for what it's worth. I hope it means something to you."

Rosalie had already relayed the message to Tenzing.

52. Babs Chu

At the Network's retreat at Babs Chu, high in the mountains to the north of Narayana, Tenzing had by now received the latest message from Rosalie and, in need of advice himself, he was with Mair Freida, the healer.

He was a tall, slim, distinguished and oriental-looking gentleman, who usually wore a suit and tie when he was at Foxholes, or sometimes jeans and a woollen jumper, But here – a bridge between east and west – he tended to wear the long, flowing robes that were the national costume of Narayana.

Mair Freida had offered him a glass of the amber nectar they called *chungari*, and now he was on his second, and as he began to relax, the healer began to weave her magic and, slowly slipping away and leaving this world behind, he once again found himself in the presence of the Elder Abbots, spiritual patrons of the timeless tradition.

He didn't have to state his case; they read it directly.

Nor did they answer him directly, with facts and figures and a concrete plan of action.

Instead, as his body lay there on Mair Freida's settee while another part of him was in some realm beyond everyday time and space, he noticed a dot in the centre of his vision. No more than a tiny speck. That's how it always started.

And slowly, over the course of perhaps twenty minutes, though he was no longer keeping time, the spot grew and grew and began to swirl around before his eyes, which were perhaps closed. It turned and turned as it gradually grew; at first in black and white, angular shapes, but then becoming more of a zigzag with the brightest colours, like yellow and orange, green, blue and purple. And growing still further and becoming more of a crescent shape, though still an almost psychedelic zigzag, eventually it almost filled his vision.

He'd experienced such a scintillating scotoma on many an occasion whilst awake and fully conscious and they were associated with migraines but never, in his case, with any kind of headache or other symptoms, except perhaps a peculiar sensation

around his head or neck, and great difficulty in reading.

And slowly, very slowly the scintillations faded away, almost without him realising it, and he gradually returned to the waking world – if you could rightly call it that – and the smiling face of Mair Freida, standing by with a nice, hot mug of coffee.

No, the Elder Abbots didn't answer him directly, but they did leave him with subtle impressions, and patterns looking for fitting experiences, and inspirations that would rightly guide him, providing he didn't get in their way.

And for now, though it would require his utmost patience and trust, they told him to simply watch and wait.

53. An Unwelcome Audience

Nanny Hayes had finally drifted off to sleep through extreme mental exhaustion when they came for her, and she had hardly opened her eyes and struggled to sit up when the two guards reached her, took hold of her under the arms and physically lifted her to her feet. And all this without a word or even a moment to compose or herself or answer the call of nature. Thankfully, since she had been deprived of food and drink since her incarceration, except for one half-empty plastic beaker that had perhaps been left by the previous occupant, she had no urge to go. Whether she'd been here for an hour or a day or a week, she had no idea. It had all been a blur. And she did wonder whether her drink had been spiked with some powerful drug.

"Come on Grannie, let's be having you," one of the guards said, roughly pushing her out of the cell and into the passageway. "There's someone waiting to see you."

"We have legs, you know. We can do my own walking," she complained, and then she realised that her legs didn't appear to want to walk in the same direction, and not knowing quite where she was. So they took her by the arms again and half dragged her down the narrow passageway before turning sharp right and heading down the main corridor toward the Vizier's offices. It was gradually coming back to her now.

They entered quite a large hall, and ahead of her she could see what she took to be the Vizier, sitting in an armchair with a high back, above which was his distinctive red, hexagonal insignia. To his right stood the Crosby woman, and to his left, much to her dismay, stood young Jonathan. He certainly looked the part in his brand new long black trousers and a black jacket with yellow trimmings. Standing tall and correct, he looked the bees' knees (the business), you might say.

Finally the guards let go and she was left half standing, half wobbling perhaps four paces away from the Vizier. But they didn't leave her: they remained close by her side. As if she, old Nanny Hayes, might present any kind of threat to the Vizier.

"To what do we owe this displeasure, your High and

Mightiness?" she called out, suddenly filled with venom.

The Vizier had his hands resting on the oak arms of his high chair, and he lifted the index finger of his right hand momentarily. Without a word, Crosby stepped forward, drew a long, wand-like stick from inside her left sleeve, walked right up to Nanny and slashed it across her face. Not only did the stick physically hurt, it came with some kind of electric shock that caused her to stagger back and see blue stars before her eyes. Crosby spun on her heel and returned to her station, and the guards pulled Nanny back into her own allotted space.

She cast her eyes toward young Jonathan, but he stood there expressionless. He did, however, avert his gaze until she turned her own attention back to the Vizier.

"Call yourself a man?" Nanny involuntarily blurted out before she'd fully engaged her brain. Perhaps she was still under the influence of the drugs.

It was the guard to her left who responded this time, catching her totally by surprise. He jabbed his cattle prod into the back of her left thigh, squeezed the trigger, and they all watched as she jerked around like a demented marionette for a few excruciatingly long moments before falling to her knees. Again, the Vizier lifted his finger, and the guards stood to attention, stepped aside, and left her there.

Nanny wiped away a tear. In part due to the assault on her body, and in part due to the assault on her heart and soul, seeing the boy just standing there and letting this happen without the slightest whiff of disdain, let alone protest. All she'd done for him and he didn't lift a finger to help her. But then, what could that little mite do?

She could almost hear Jonathan in her head right now, telling her, "I am not a child!"

To which she of course replied, "Quite right, young man."

Nanny Hayes would have laughed if she hadn't so much felt the urge to cry.

"Who are you working for?" the Vizier suddenly demanded, loudly, as he rose from his seat. "We will find out, you know, sooner or later. So you might as well tell us now and save yourself a lot of pain."

"Over my dead body," Nanny spat, struggling to her feet. The

game was up so she might as well drop the pretence.

"It may well come to that," the man laughed out loud.

Crosby had already stepped forward, but the Vizier stayed her hand. "Not now. She's not ready yet. Get her out of our sight and let her stew a little longer. She's still as tough as old boots.

"Give the old woman time and she'll eventually come crawling and begging for mercy. Why settle for one or two names now when we can play the long game and hold out for ten or a hundred a little later on?

"Besides which," the Vizier beamed, stepping to one side and playfully tussling the boy's hair. "The woman is not our most important concern now."

"Then why not turn her over to us," Crosby suggested.

"Our Lord," the woman added belatedly.

The Vizier put his hands on his hips, a frightful expression crossing his features for a split moment before he wiped it off again, but long enough for Nanny to notice. "What, and spoil the fun?"

Nanny realised then that here was a man who could fly into a violent rage over the most tenuous thing, such as a slight or what he perceived to be impudence. She saw that young Jonathan had also seen the same thing and perhaps arrived at a similar conclusion. Their eyes met for an equally fleeting moment, before he averted his gaze, and the brief contact was lost.

"Our Lord," Crosby bowed in submission.

That hag had better watch her step or there'll be sparks flying, Nanny mused as the two guards dragged her from the hall and headed for the cells. You mark my words.

They did bring her a little food and some water later that day, but as she tore into the stale bread bun, she realised that they'd given her just enough to keep her alive, and still leave her weak and hungry, and no more.

54. The Final Leg

Having successfully navigated the southern tip of the island, Will looked like he was on his last legs, and Rowan seemed to be flagging, too. Fortunately, it seemed that the tide was coming in, and that at least reduced the risk of their being swept out to sea. Well, that was Holly's theory and she was sticking to it, at least until Prof informed her otherwise.

There was only one thing for it. She and the Prof would have to take over the oars for a few minutes at least, in order to give Will and Rowan a breather and let them get some more food down. She handed her rations to Will who looked like he most needed them and, taking the hint, Prof passed his rations to Rowan. Rowan was a gallant man, and he could be proud at times, but he'd probably performed his own calculations, and gladly accepted the food and drink.

Progress up the east side of the island was slow, and once again they were bobbing up and down, but both she and Prof had recovered from their seasickness, and they put as much effort into their rowing as they could. Whether they were even making two miles an hour, Holly couldn't tell, but as the sun began to sink behind the island later, they'd know for sure. And trust her luck there would be too many clouds and just a sliver of moon.

They rowed on for as long as they could manage and Prof quite surprised her. For an admittedly scrawny guy, he did his fair share. He was on the right side of the boat and pulling on the oars harder than her, so Rowan who was manning the tiller had to compensate to stop the boat swinging round toward the land.

"Which is port and which is starboard?" she happened to ask Prof and he just shrugged apologetically. The walking encyclopaedia for once was stumped.

"There is no red port left," Will reliably informed her. "A red light on the left-hand side. That's port."

After a time, they'd had enough and again they played musical chairs in the rowing boat as Will and Rowan took their places without losing the oars overboard or tipping over.

Finally, as the sun must have dipped behind the high hill to

their left – on the port side – she caught sight of what looked like their cove. Will and Rowan hadn't seen it yet, because of course they were facing the stern, but when she pointed it out, they steadied their oars for a moment or two and peered over their shoulders to see for themselves.

And within half an hour they had grounded the boat on the shingle beach and hopped out to draw it onto the beach. It was a good job the tide had been coming in, because as they passed them by, some of those rocks could have damaged the bottom of the boat or the rudder, even though Holly did her best to guide them through the deeper channel in the centre.

Remembering her earlier thoughts, Holly turned to Rowan and Will. "Best drag the boat further up, so it can't be seen from the top of the cliffs."

Rowan caught hold of her arm, but gently. "Something on your mind?" he asked.

"Maybe just me being paranoid, Rowan. But better safe than sorry, eh?"

Rowan accepted that, and once the boat had been shifted, and they'd checked that the patch on the side of the boat was still intact, as it was, Rowan immediately headed for the steps leading up the cliffs. Maybe him just being paranoid, too. But the sooner they called for rescue, and they were off the island, the better.

She nearly said safely back home, but of course they no longer had a place they could call home. Nor family, for that matter. And again, as that thought passed through her, Holly could feel the tears welling up in her eyes once more. Well, as her dear mother would have consoled her: better out than in.

55. Message Received Loud and Clear

Tenzing had already gone off to bed and was fast asleep when a third message arrived, again via the friendly radio ham, Wilbur Jones at Shakra, though this time it was from one of their agents on the north-west coast.

Tenzing didn't mind in the least, and simply took it in his stride, but it must have been urgent for the night porter to wake him in the middle of the night with a long transcript of the message, so he left the bedroom and went through to his study.

Though he actually knew nothing of the arrangement, the agent had reported that a distress call had been issued by a party of four adults, three men and a woman, who were stranded on what he termed a hostile island off the coast of Kvinslandia. And as soon as he read that name, that immediately woke him up and he took a minute or two to brew himself a strong coffee, before returning to his desk. He could be in for a long night.

A ship had already been dispatched, so the message reported, so that was one less worry. And it also perhaps gave him another option for the other business in the capital, Avilys. There was no point in sending anybody from Babs Chu, as it would take them an age to get down out of the mountains and across the central plateau to the coast. And the overland route, down to the south of Narayana and then back up through the Freelands would take even longer.

After that report, there was some background information on the castaways. They were dissidents and they'd managed to escape from the regime to an island off the east coast of Kvinslandia, having been led to believe that it was a safe haven. But in fact they'd simply sailed into a trap. The natives there had tried to detain and even shoot them, and they'd had to flee further south on the heavily-wooded island. Since then, a recluse whose name was not mentioned had guided them to the emergency radio that the Network had installed and kept maintained.

So at this time, they'd be there awaiting rescue.

And as soon as Tenzing read the names Rowan Kingsley and Holly Potter another piece of the jigsaw puzzle clicked into place. They just had to be the Holly and Rohan that the operative in Avilys had mentioned in the second report.

Tenzing had another sip of his coffee, then went across to the cabinet and topped it up with a couple of nips of *chungari* (the "Herb of Enlightenment" as it was otherwise known). He paced up and down for a time, lost in thought, before returning to the desk and re-reading the three reports.

He would bet his last noble (bottom dollar) that the Vizier had taken an interest in the boy because he was gifted in some way. That would explain Cathy Morris reporting that she'd heard voices from someone whose lips did not move. That was something more than the usual, bog-standard extrasensory perception that most people weren't even aware of having and using. What would you call it – psychokinesis? And according to Rosalie, who'd checked the records, Cathy was a perfectly level-headed young lady.

Of course, he possessed that ability himself, but in someone so young, and most likely untrained as well: if he were the Vizier, he would be excited about it, too, though probably for diametrically opposed reasons.

So, what does the boy say? "Tell Holly and Rohan that I'm sorry." And she goes on to say that "Those aren't names that Hive-Minded people would use; they're the sort of old-fashioned names that the dissidents call themselves, secret names that they wouldn't even dare use in front of their own children, out of a very real fear of betrayal. That's what it's like living here, only ten times, a hundred times, as bad as that."

Again, though this would have to be corroborated by further intelligence, he would bet that the boy had discovered that his parents were dissidents and had betrayed them to the authorities. That would also account for the fact that they were on the run ... No, wait a minute: either they were betrayed on the mainland and ran to the island, or else they were in danger already, fled to the island, and their son betrayed them there.

Again, from the records Rosalie had pulled up, the agent who was arrested had been working as a nanny for the regime. She had

been looking after the boy. And now the Vizier had them both in custody. So perhaps it was the boy who had betrayed the nanny, as well.

Rather than go back to bed, since he was possibly too wide awake by now to sleep in any case, Tenzing pulled his trusty old manual typewriter toward him, sandwiched a sheet of good old-fashioned carbon paper between two sheets of writing paper so that he had a carbon copy and, adept at two finger typing, he quickly outlined his findings in a reply to Rosalie. Then he had to go and wake up Ruth Broodbent. The lovely lady might not be too chuffed at being pulled out of bed in the middle of the night to power-up the radio, but this was urgent. He'd sweeten her up with the promise of a couple of days off once this affair had been sorted out.

Then, and only then, would he be able to lay his head down and grab some more sleep. And it would also perhaps put Rosalie's mind at rest. There were few things worse than the combination of waiting, loose ends, uncertainty, and a sense of powerlessness. Especially for a caring and efficient person like Rosalie Muller.

56. Party Tricks

The following day, Nanny Hayes was brought before the Vizier again. She actually did have to be dragged this time, because she was feeling even weaker and her legs were threatening to give way beneath her. To his credit, young Jonathan had suggested they give her something to sit on, and perhaps willing to humour the boy, the Vizier lifted his right index finger and one of the guards marched over to one side of the hall, opened what was presumably a cupboard or store room and came back with a chair. It was an upright chair with no arms and no padding, she saw, but she was in no position nor mood to complain.

She suddenly remembered the Vizier's nickname one or two of the other staff had given him. Wormston? No, that was his real name. Wormtongue. Yes that was it. That wasn't much help to her in her current predicament, of course, but it reminded her that beneath that glittering quasi-royal exterior, he was just a slimy, cold-blooded and ignoble reptile who liked toying with people and watching them squirm. It helped put things in perspective.

Wormston was about to say something to her when Jonathan stepped closer to the man and interrupted him. Nanny drew in her breath sharply. That boy had better mind his step.

Jonathan had something in his pocket, and he drew it out. Something red. Red and white. Of course, it was the pack of playing cards. It was to be hoped that the Vizier was in a good mood.

"Pick a card," the boy invited, making a fan of the cards and holding them out in front of him, face down.

"Queen of pentacles," he confidently called out, after the Vizier had snatched one from the pack and turned it over to examine it.

"Child's play," the Vizier retorted, tossing the card aside.

The boy was not deterred. "Pick another, but this time, don't look at it."

Then, even before the Vizier had selected a card, as his hand hovered in the air between them, the boy added, "The Hermit."

The Vizier merely raised his eyebrows and plucked out one of the cards. He turned it over. She couldn't make out which card it was, but the look of triumph on Jonathan's face showed that he had, indeed, been correct.

The Vizier tossed the card in the boy's direction and he had to crawl around on the marble floor to pick up that and the earlier card. "Cheap party tricks," the Vizier retorted, and he wiped spittle off his chin with the long sleeve of his red and white robe. The boy was perhaps too young and naïve to appreciate this deliberate belittlement.

Jonathan was a little abashed perhaps, or at least he should be, but he was still undeterred. He picked a card from the pack himself, glanced at it, and held it close to his chest. "Now, you tell us what card we're holding," he requested.

For a moment the Vizier looked like he was about to bellow "How the hell should we know!" and he'd already half risen to his feet, but then he promptly sat down again.

"The Fool," he replied instead.

How appropriate.

The boy stepped closer and showed the Vizier the card. And the Vizier merely nodded, indicating that it was in fact that very card.

"That's all very well, and clever in its own way, lad," the Vizier conceded. "But we've told you once already, and we do not like to have to repeat ourselves: We are not in the *least* interested in seeing cheap party tricks. If we'd wanted a conjurer or a court jester, the capital is full of such charlatans for easy hire."

He paused for a moment. Then, leaning forward with his hands firmly pressed on the arms of his throne, the Vizier bellowed, "Show us something real", placing particular emphasis on the word "real".

The boy looked around him, and particularly across at Crosby who was standing at a discreet distance from the Vizier's right shoulder.

Almost immediately, the woman had begun to visibly fidget, though no words had been spoken, and there was no apparent reason for her discomfort.

Now the boy turned back to the Vizier and addressed the

pseudo-pontiff. “There are rumours that you plan to dethrone the Queen,” he began.

“False rumours, of course,” the boy hastily added as the Vizier’s face flushed.

Crosby had turned to face the Vizier now and she was visibly shaking with rage. “The boy speaks nonsense!” she retorted loudly, perhaps forgetting etiquette or casting it aside.

Jonathan took a step back, as if shocked at this sudden outburst.

“These are all lies!” the woman declared adamantly, and Nanny could see that her hand was not far from the wand that she kept up her sleeve.

“Silence!” the Vizier bellowed, his hands tightly gripping the arms of his throne.

“They are concocting wicked schemes to frame you for treason and have you hanged in the square,” the boy blurted out urgently.

“We demand to know who these people are!” the Vizier bellowed, and his voice echoed around the marble hall.

The two guards ran to the Vizier's side now, as if on some unspoken order. Then the Vizier lifted his finger and they drew their cattle prods.

As they did so, Crosby drew out her own wand and for a moment it looked like she was going to face them, but as they slowly and warily advanced toward her, and she in turn stepped back, she suddenly made a bolt for the door. However, other guards near the entrance to the hallway barred the woman’s escape and she had no option but to cast down her wand.

“No, Crosby!” the Vizier called out loudly. “It is you who will be tried for treason!”

Jonathan stepped closer to the Vizier now, though Nanny could see that he was in a rage and fit to bust a blood vessel. The boy whispered something in the Vizier’s ear and motioned toward the woman before quite wisely standing back.

“She’s a traitor,” the Vizier nodded. “And traitors do not deserve a trial. She is to be hung in the public square as a warning to others.”

One of the guards dared to ask a question. “When, our Lord?”

Vizier Wormston drew in a deep breath. “That is the wrong question, soldier. The correct question is ‘How high, our Lord?’”

The guard bowed deeply and ran down the hall to the others who now had the Crosby woman in custody, and Jonathan stepped away from the Vizier and returned to his allotted position to the left of the throne.

Nanny was looking intently at the boy, and for another brief moment their eyes met, and it was as if an unspoken understanding passed between them. But then the boy averted his eyes, once more expressionless and inscrutable.

And within the hour, the Crosby woman would be hanging from high above a makeshift gallows in the centre of the square. It was said that her body would remain there until the maggots began falling from her rotting corpse.

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A while later, greatly pleased by the boy’s conduct, and having dismissed Nanny Hayes and the two guards, the Vizier had decided to take young Jonathan out for a stroll in the palace park. “We think you deserve a treat, young man. As they rightly say, ‘All work and no play makes Jonathan a dull boy.’ Or if they didn’t, they will now.”

“Thank you, our Lord,” the boy bowed as they walked along. “We’d very much like to explore the Museum. We’ve always had a fascination for ancient armour and weaponry. And instruments of torture.”

The Vizier patted the boy on the shoulder. Having taken the boy under his wing, he’d been told that was the fatherly sort of thing to do. “That can easily be arranged.”

“And I’d also very much like to meet the Queen.”

“We”, the boy hastily added, his face reddening. Vizier Wormston dismissed it, putting it down to all the time he had spent living with the dissidents.

He took hold of the lapels on his red and white robe and raised his eyebrows, but something told him there would be no harm in this. “Again, Jonathan, we’ll see what we can do.”

°Soon.° That’s what he thought the boy had said, though he hadn’t seen his lips move. For a moment, he did think that perhaps he should remind the child who was in charge, but that thought simply vanished in a flash.
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“Soon, indeed,” he agreed.

“It’s a beautiful day,” the boy marvelled, turning round and round with his arms spread wide and looking around him.

“It is, indeed,” he concurred. He really must get out more. Spend some time away from all the fools who daily surrounded him.

°And one other thing,° the Vizier found himself thinking. °If there is a treasonous plot against us, we have to prioritise our resources. Bring more loyal men in from the provinces, in case they take up arms against us and we have to make a stand.°

The boy nodded. “That’s exactly what we were thinking, our Lord. We shouldn’t be wasting valuable manpower on a wild goose chase looking for those petty fugitives. You really don’t need Kingsley or Potter now that you have us.”

The Vizier stopped in his tracks, spun round on the spot, and grabbed hold of the boy by the arm, but not too roughly.

“That’s decided then. Back to the office. We have plans to make and orders to issue.”

“Now, if only we could remember the name of the man we sent to that island.” He scratched his chin thoughtfully as they walked back to the main building. “Never mind, it will come to us.”

°Frampton.°

“Oh, that’s it. Branston. No, no. It’s on the tip of our tongue. Frampton, yes that’s it. Of course he’s not there now, but he’ll know who we need to deal with on the island.”

57. Rearguard Action

The first bunch of pohlees, Silas could deal with. The guy who was supposed to be leading them was an amateur, quite unaccustomed to the wilds, and his men were ill-equipped. They had to return to base camp at *The Last Chance* every day, so they never managed to venture further than north of the island. They'd tried their hand at camping out in the woods, but had soon given up on that idea. And he'd thankfully disposed of two of them by leading them across a patch of quicksand down by the sea in the north-east. The more the poor beggars struggled, the deeper they sank.

But this new guy they'd brought in was an entirely different kettle of fish, or can of worms. One or t'other. His men were far better equipped, they'd brought tracker dogs with them, and he was clearly an expert guide. He'd have been able to save the men from the quicksand, of course, but he was elsewhere, further south.

It was the dogs that caught the scent, and it didn't take them long to find the trail down from the ruins near the statue, and on to where the friends had camped. They'd let the dogs off the leash now, and straight away they were off down toward the shore with the men doing their best to keep up.

There was nothing Silas could do about that, though, other than to hoof it into the trees, leaving a clear trail for now, before having a paddle up a stream and, when he was back on dry land, wipe some more of his own special juice on the soles of his shoes to confuse the scent.

And then, just when he thought he could take a breather, blow me if he didn't almost bump into a group of three of the tracker's men. Well, with no hope of making a run for it, there was only one thing for it. He brought out his Granpop's old revolver and took one of them out. Made a frightful bang that must have been heard for miles. Then he crept away through the bushes.

They were still close-by, the other two, and he could clearly see the bright red glow of the indicators on their disrupters. Great

camouflage, that. Set to lethal, most likely. They looked pretty spooked and every time they thought they heard something, they'd swing round and fire wildly into the trees. He could hear them, too, arguing about whether they should scarper.

Silas chewed his thumb and waited, knowing that he couldn't stay there much longer. Others were bound to have heard the shots and they'd come running.

Then, as the two of them stood out in the open for a moment, listening, he bit the bullet and let off two shots in their direction. He took one of them out, clean as a whistle, but just snagged the other in the left thigh. He let out a yelp and dropped his disrupter, then ran off, dragging his left leg behind him. With luck, that was another who would see no more action on the island.

Silas ran out from undercover and grabbed the two disrupters. That was a very fortunate thing, because his revolver was a dead giveaway and in any case, he only had one more bullet.

And now, Silas old man, you'd better hightail it away from the area before they set the dogs on you. That's if you know what's good for you.

58. Bottoms Up

It had been a largely mind-numbing drive for Harold Grainger and largely uneventful, other than having to stop to change a flat tyre on the rough road leading up through Hodweir.

He'd passed through the border security post easily enough. It was coming back the other way that was a pain. He had every right to pass to-and-fro across the border, of course, but if any of the guards were in one of those moods, they could make it a long and tiring process. They could even make life difficult for Tenzing and, strictly speaking and on paper at least, he had diplomatic immunity.

On the way back in, they sometimes had mechanics strip out the seating and probe around under the car; even probe inside the fuel tank. And occasionally they would perform strip searches, not that he had anything on his person to hide, other than his embarrassment. So, he would have misgivings about extracting any potential escapees via this route. Apart from anything else, it would require a lot of careful and meticulous planning. The Network had systems in place, with their people on both sides of the border, and they'd been smuggling needy folk into the Freelands for many years now. And yet on this occasion, he had an uneasy feeling about such a course of action.

Of course another, safer option would be to take escapees south from Kvinslandia to Hodweir and book them on a passage by sea across to Narayana which lay due east. And then, possibly, make the long trek to the retreat at Babs Chu, *if, and only if* it had been clearly established that they were suited to the terrain and, above all, trustworthy.

But that was mostly idle speculation at this point.

Whatever. Harold had made it through Customs at the border crossing into Kvinslandia. What Rosalie wasn't as yet aware of was the heightened security here, too, which was something else to think about. In this country, they let you in easily enough, but it looked like they took great care not to allow their people to leave.

Anyway, he finally managed to navigate his way through the city of Avilys, and he was just now turning into a side street and

checking the numbers on the apartment blocks, looking for the one where his old friend Max lived.

As it happened, Max was out of the front door waving even before Harold had fetched the suitcase from his car and locked up. He perhaps had a seventh sense, the sixth being a sense of humour.

Max came down the short path to greet him and Harold put his suitcase down for a moment while they shook hands and slapped one-another on the back.

"Our word, you're looking good," Max enthused, and for a moment Harold was a little perplexed by the turn of phrase, and then he remembered that so-called Hive-Minded people avoided the personal pronoun like the plague, though there were sometimes lapses, especially in times of stress.

"Aren't we just," he smiled back.

Max was about to take the suitcase from him, but seeing that the man wasn't quite as sprightly as he used to be, he politely declined.

"Anyway, do come in, please," Max enthused, standing aside from the door and waving him ahead. "Saluton kaj bonvenon!"

Max shut the door-to behind them, and locked it.

"Saluton what?" he queried.

"Oh, just a bit of lingo I picked up on the job, or *lingvo*, as they would say. Donkeys' years back it was. It means 'Hello and welcome!'"

"Don't be a stranger: my apartment is straight on down the corridor on the ground floor, thank goodness. Number 6 on the right, with a delightful, scenic view of the next cold grey building and the refuse bins next door. The door's open, so go straight in."

Once inside the narrow hallway, Max again chirped up, "Drop your bag, and sit yourself down in front of the fire. First and only door on the left. And I'll go through to the kitchenette, the only door straight ahead, and brew us a tea or coffee."

"Thank you, tea would be wonderful," he nodded. Like Rosalie, he was in the habit of drinking char.

Max had closed and locked the front door by now. And he came closer and whispered in Harold's ear. "Perhaps something a little stronger?"

Then: "I'm sorry that the tea is an inferior synthetic

substitute, but I can assure you that the moonshine is the real stuff, though nowhere near as good as a glass of *chungari*."

Harold could have slapped himself. "Oh I am so sorry, Max. I really should have brought you a bottle from Tenzing's special reserve. That's most remiss of me."

The man wasn't the least put out. As he poured them a very liberal measure of moonshine and returned the bottle to its secret hiding place, he advised, "Don't worry, old son, you wouldn't have made it through customs with anything containing alcohol, not even your Grandma's sherry trifle or a box of liquor chocolates."

They clinked glasses. Well, plastic tumblers.

"Bottoms up!" they said in unison.

"That bad is it, Max?"

Max sighed and guided them both to chairs placed at angles to the fireplace in the cramped living room. Alas, there were no burning coals or logs, just a warm orange and infrared glow. So much for progress, eh?

"How long have you got?" the man asked him, hastening to add, "And you're more than welcome to stay here for as long as you like or for as long as you need. That's what Friends are for, with a capital F."

He thanked Max profusely.

"In answer to your question, yes it is bad. Think of how bad it can be, short of mass exterminations and what-not, mostly insidious stuff, and times it by ten. We've exchanged letters, of course, but there's only so much I dared to divulge. And that's why I asked you, how long have you got, because if I start at the beginning, it will be a long story that will take us into the early hours of the morning and yet do little more than scratch the surface."

Harold nodded gravely, "Yes, one of our agents recently said much the same thing in her reports, which is one of the reasons I'm here now."

Behind his bright blue eyes, Harold detected a deep sadness.

"Anyway, Harold. We can, however, take a break part way through and enjoy an evening meal, you'll be thankful to know. Oh! And you can get a wash or a shower later. Perhaps while I'm fixing the food? Or now if you prefer. I'm sorry, never having had

a wife – or should I say social partner? – I'm still not fully domesticated. There was never any time for that sort of thing when I was working undercover.

"And of course you must tell me all about life in the Freelands and Tenzing's ancestral homeland. Kvinslandia has become very insular, and not much news filters across the border. Neither in nor out."

59. Treason

On the day that Jonathan's audience with the Queen had been arranged, the Vizier was preoccupied with other more pressing matters, though he had intended to escort the boy and bask in the minor glory. As for the Hayes woman, he'd lost all interest in her and would instead hand her over to one of his senior aides for a more formal and clinically thorough interrogation. Had the boy seen what they could actually do with the instruments of torture that he had an interest in, it would have turned even his stomach.

Anyway, after speaking to Potter, he had left him in the charge of another of his aides, having been convinced that the boy was worthy of his trust, and reminded of the grave plots that were being waged against him.

Since the audience was scheduled for the afternoon, the Vizier had also allowed the boy the opportunity to have a look round the museum in the morning, and then he'd have a bite to eat at one of the palace cafeterias, though not too much to spoil his appetite, as the Queen would no doubt provide Her guest with sandwiches and cake, perhaps when tea was served mid-afternoon. The Vizier couldn't tell beforehand how well the boy would be received by the Queen. So he might be in and out within the hour if he disappointed her, or he could be there for most of the afternoon if she took a shine to him. As ever, he would be at the mercy of the Royal Whim. Or caprice, in layman's terms.

So it was that the Queen received Jonathan, not in the grand throne room, which might have unduly intimidated him, but instead in the smaller and more intimate of her two reception rooms. It was usually reserved for less important guests, but the boy wasn't to know that.

Everything went swimmingly well for the first hour, since Jonathan had brought along his playing cards and entertained Her Royal Highness with his tricks. And then, having decided that things were going well, the Queen signalled to one of her male attendants and, shortly afterwards, sooner than it would have taken to prepare, a maid entered the room, wheeling in a silver trolley and silently setting out sandwiches, cake, small plates,

cups, saucers and other cutlery on a small table in the room, in a bay window looking out onto the Royal Gardens.

Then, having wheeled the trolley out of the way, the young woman stood to one side, coming forward only when the Queen signalled with a twitch of her raised right hand that they were ready to eat, in which case a male, perhaps a butler saw to the seating arrangements, or the maid came forward to pour the tea.

For his part, Jonathan had never seen anything like this before, and had he been alone he would simply have dived in and stuffed his face full of sandwich, but for now he had to grin and bear all the fussy protocol, being careful to watch how the Queen Herself behaved and copying her manner, though not her affectations.

Finally, this minor ordeal was over, the table had been silently cleared, and they were back in their cushioned armchairs once more. As for the butler, he remained. Standing by the door unsmiling, with his white-gloved hands dutifully placed together in front of him, to attend to the Queen and her guest's every need or desire.

They made idle chit-chat for a few minutes, and then the boy quite abruptly changed the subject.

"Your Majesty," he addressed her and looked this way and that, conspiratorially, though of course with the exception of the butler, they were quite alone. "We noticed the other day that the Vizier had one of his aides hung. We saw the body on a scaffold in the square."

The Queen looked quite taken aback. She reached into her pocket, brought out a small fan, flipped it open, and waved it about in front of her face.

"Oh, dear, dear. This is most unsavoury, and not at all the kind of subject that a child should concern himself with."

The boy looked at Her, and She looked back at him, and she tittered, though unaccustomed to correcting Herself. "But of course, you're not a child, you're a young man. And do, please do, call me Ma'am."

"Forgive us for broaching such a delicate and unsavoury topic, Ma'am, but this is a matter of the utmost importance," and as he said these words, he was nodding his head, and she found herself nodding in agreement.

“The woman had discovered a dastardly plot to commit treason,” the boy explained.

°That wretch is after My throne!° she suddenly realised, but she remained silent for now. °Though of course I’ve suspected treachery for a long time.°

The boy nodded in agreement. “And you have every reason to be deeply concerned.

“As you’ve probably been informed by now, we have what they call special gifts. We can read people’s minds – and no, don’t worry, we wouldn’t dream of doing that to you, Ma'am. But we read his mind. It was dark, and frightful, and full of wicked schemes.”

The Queen drew Herself up in Her chair, and She looked almost distraught. “I’m sorry, and I am deeply grateful for your intelligence, young man, but I really do think that you should leave now.”

The boy had another important card to play in his long game. “And there’s a woman, too, Nanny Hayes, who was looking after us, Ma'am. The Vizier had her locked up in the cells on some trumped up charges. But we know she’s a good person who would hurt or betray nobody. And she certainly wouldn’t help the dissidents, as the Vizier has claimed.”

The Queen rose to her feet and summoned the butler, and he in turn left the room to bring the aide, who had been patiently waiting for the boy on a seat outside the room.

“Don’t worry your little head about that, young man,” the Queen smiled momentarily, laying her hand on his shoulder. “Thank you once again. And now, I am afraid you must leave.”

And with that, the Queen reached for her handbag and swept out of the room, with neither a word for the butler, nor for the expectant aide.

And the very next day, the Crosby woman’s body had been taken down from the scaffold and laid in a chapel of rest, and now the former-Vizier Wormston’s body, still in his red and white robe, had replaced it. And let that be a warning to anyone who dare commit treason in Avilys. Indeed, in any part of Kvinslandia.

60. I Spy

Franklin, the tracker, stood on top of the hill looking out over the island, surrounded by league upon league of cruel ocean. In the far distance, not far from the horizon, he thought that he spied something white, though it could have simply been the white crest of a wave. Nevertheless, he took out and extended his old brass telescope, used it as a sight, then put his eye to the lens and adjusted the focus. It was quite windy on top of the hill, and it took some time before he again found the white spot and steadied himself.

Yes, it was the unmistakable white mast of a ship or a boat. It was way too far away to be able to make out what type of boat it was. He waited a few minutes and looked again and he was almost certain that it was closer now and heading this way. And he wondered then whether it might actually be coming to rescue the fugitives. That was just a guess, of course, but all the same, that's what his gut was telling him. And time would prove him right or wrong.

He looked down toward the coastline, adjusting the focus again and scanning from right to left. That might seem unusual to most folks, but he was, after all, left handed. Not that his Hive-Abiding parents and his teachers hadn't tried to break him free of this heretical habit. That sort of nonsense messed with people's heads.

And then he spotted it. A u-shaped bite taken out of the cliff edge that was most likely an inlet. And two wooden uprights that were quite clearly man-made. There was nothing natural about them. Well, except for the wood, of course. And unless he was gravely mistaken – and he was not – that meant steps of some sort, or perhaps a ladder, leading down the cliff. And you didn't need to be a Special ruddy Investigator like that fool Morrison to put two and two together.

But Morrison had gone now. "Orders is orders," he'd said, and he'd buggered off with all the men. Well, sod that for a game of soldiers. There was still a bounty on the fugitives' heads and he had a personal score to settle. Not much worse than making

enemies when you're locked up with Crims, especially if you're ex-Fuss. They'd originally accepted a right ear, but the old honour system had been sorely abused. However, a severed head was still accepted currency.

He put the cap back on his telescope and pocketed it, then slowly made his way down the hillside, through the light trees, and down toward the inlet. By the time he got to the bottom of the hill, he'd probably be able to see the boat again. And if he was wrong about it, as sometimes he was, then that was no major catastrophe. Worse things happen at sea, so they say.

Ah, but if he was right, as he frequently was, then it might be the end of *their* world.

61. Ahoy There!

Holly was the first to catch sight of the man as they stood watching for the rescue boat. She let out a low guttural and primeval groan of fear, and Rowan, Will, and John immediately spun round, scrunching the shingle underfoot.

High above them, and descending the steps, was the tracker. He was on his own, by the looks of it, but he had a disrupter in his hands.

Holly looked anxiously out to sea. Yes, the ship was coming, but it still had miles to go. Could they launch the boat in time?

Rowan pulled out his own disrupter, the pocket-sized version, that was, got down on one knee, took aim, and squeezed the trigger. The thing spluttered. The indicator went out. And nothing happened.

By this time, Will had his knife out. But bringing a knife to a gunfight? Not much use, thought Rowan.

Holly looked at the sea. Could they swim for it? No, fifteen minutes in that water and they'd probably get hypothermia.

The man was half-way down the steps now.

Oh, dear Alicia. Not now. Not now!

The steps were narrow, and he'd only be able to take one of them out at a time. Rowan mentally volunteered to go first.

Just then, Rowan caught sight of a second figure at the top of the steps. So it looked like the tracker had brought his men along with him, after all.

Suddenly, there was a flash, and then a very loud crack, and the man's body jerked. But then he turned round. He was wounded, but he was still standing.

"Catch!" the shooter called out, just diving for cover in time as the tracker fired a volley of shots toward him, setting fire to the grass where his feet had just been.

It was Silas.

Rowan ran forward and caught the disrupter as it arced through the air. It seemed to take an age. Aware that if it had landed it would probably exploded and blown them all to kingdom come.

The safety catch was on. He released it. The indicator was on.

He aimed toward the tracker and squeezed the trigger. Swung slowly round to rake the whole area where the man was standing, with violent blue sparks.

Finally the man was down on his knees. Toppled from the narrow path. Bounced down the steep slope. Landed with a loud scrunch in the shingle at the head of the beach.

There was no movement at the top of the steps.

"All clear!" cried Holly at the top of her voice.

Slowly, tentatively, old Silas peered over the edge, took in the scene, stamped out the smouldering grass, and began his slow descent.

When the old man finally reached the bottom and Holly rushed as best she could through the deep shingle to greet him and give him a big hug, he shrugged.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I knew how to work the revolver, but for the life of me I couldn't work out how to use that newfangled gizmo."

"Look!" John called, from further down the beach. They all turned and saw that the ship was approaching the cove now, but not too close due to the rock hazard.

And they were lowering a boat.

"Ahoy there!" came a woman's voice over a megaphone, followed by three loud tools on the ship's horn.

And again, as she clutched tight hold of Silas, she was overcome with emotion.

The old man turned his head and kissed her tenderly on the cheek. "You've certainly been through the wars, young Holly, but the tracker was the last of them, and the worst is over now."

Over for some, perhaps, she sighed deeply.

62. A Marvellous Spectacle

When they came for Nanny Hayes that day, she thought the worst. She knew that before long Vizier Wormtongue would lose interest in her. Just like the Queen, he was a shallow and capricious man. And then he'd pass her over to the others for interrogation. Crosby was gone, but there would be ten willing and equally sadistic candidates to fill the casual vacancy.

And of course she was deeply concerned for young Jonathan's welfare. She didn't know what kind of game he was playing, but he was clearly up to no good. She was going to say that perhaps he might find it in his heart to help her in some way, but the flawed assumption behind that, of course, was that he actually had a heart.

"Up yer get, Granny," the guard said, and she was expecting to be unceremoniously yanked to her feet and dragged from the cell, but there was only the one guard that day, and behind her she saw a familiar face. In fact two familiar faces. It was young Cathy Morris bearing a small table and chair and Joan Crawford, also from the kitchens, bearing what looked like a tray full of food, with a metal cover over the top to keep it warm.

Her first thought was that Cathy was taking a terrible risk, but instead she gasped. "Dear Alicia, and to what do I owe this pleasure."

And of course she bit her tongue after foolishly uttering the Noble Lady's name, but fortunately neither the guard nor the ladies seem to have noticed, or if they did then they said nothing.

Having opened the door for them, the guard had disappeared off down the corridor.

"We brought you food," Joan told her, rather superfluously. "You've been released, but we thought you'd need to recover a bit of your strength first, rather than wheeling you all the way to the kitchens."

"Thank you so much," she beamed.

"It's a long story, and I don't know where to start," Cathy informed her.

"Then you'd best take your time and start at the beginning,"

she smiled, tucking into the chicken. Something bland, so as not to upset her after so long without food. And nice cold milk, too. That was very thoughtful.

So Cathy told her all she'd been able to find out about the Crosby woman being accused of plotting against the Vizier, and the later discovery that it was she who had actually discovered a plot by the Vizier against the Queen. And their being hung for all to see in the centre of the square, Crosby by the Vizier and then the Vizier by the Queen. Justice had been served. Poetic justice, Nanny mused.

It was much later, of course, that the true story began to circulate. Indeed, most were convinced that it was actually the Queen who had had the Vizier and one of his aides murdered, for her own nefarious purposes. The little bees had a love-hate relationship with their Queen, but that was always kept under tightly-bound wraps.

And that did make Nanny Hayes wonder about sweet and innocent young Jonathan's role in all this. That lad was always up to something.

Later that day, Cathy came back to see her, and took her through to the washrooms so Nanny could get a much-needed shower and a change of clothing.

"Hope you don't mind, Nanny, but I had to go into your rooms to fetch some fresh clothes."

"Not at all, Cathy. I greatly appreciate your kind help. Won't you be missed in the kitchens, though?"

"Head Cook gave me the day off. Paid an' all. It seems you're a bit of celebrity, helping uncover the Vizier's dirty dealings."

"Really?" Nanny half-laughed, half-frowned. "I can assure you, I had little to do with that."

Cathy smiled. "Who's to know otherwise, Nanny. Enjoy the fame while it lasts. Heck, you might even get a medal from the Queen."

Nanny was aghast. "Perish the thought!"

Then she added, in unnecessarily hushed tones, "Just between you, me, and these four walls, you understand."

"And the Network," Cathy added. "Don't worry, I've kept them informed."

Nanny gently squeezed the girl's hand. "You be careful, my love. We don't want you getting into trouble as well."

An hour later and Nanny was back at her own office in the nursery. She had to pick up one or two things and then she was going to spend the rest of the day relaxing in her rooms.

She was most surprised, firstly by another familiar face at the door when she answered the insistent knock, and secondly because, seeing young Jonathan there, she was surprised that he had the courtesy to knock in the first place.

Anyhow, in spite of her very much mixed feelings, she welcomed him and gently ushered him inside. Of course, part of her wanted to wring the boy's neck.

And for a second time she uttered those immortal worlds, "And to what do we owe this pleasure? We thought you'd left Nanny now and were making a name for yourself in more courtly circles."

Was that too harsh a thing for her to have said to the boy?

"Anyway, do come and sit down and we'll make you a drink. Or something to eat, if you like."

"I'm the one who had you released," the boy said, but without any sign of protest behind his words, and he didn't seem at all concerned about his use of the personal pronoun. Perhaps he knew that she was in no position to dob him in, as they say. If this was true, then she owed him a great deal of gratitude.

"Oh, we see," she replied. "Actually, we'd better rephrase that: no, we actually don't see. That's news to us. But thank you all the same."

"We spoke to the Queen," he partially explained.

"You? You mean you've actually met the Queen. Why, how marvellous."

Of course, she had her qualms, and an intense dislike for the woman and her militant regime, but she didn't say anything about that.

"We've heard all sorts of rumours, Jonathan, so have a drink of your coffee and then perhaps we'd better hear your side of the story."

A few minutes later, and being not much the wiser, since Jonathan had chosen his words very carefully, and perhaps twizzled around with her own thoughts in some mysterious way,

Jonathan asked her what time it was.

“Good gracious me, it's already six thirty,” she noted.

“Then we have to go now,” the boy announced, already rising to his feet and turning toward the door.

“Go where?” she enquired.

“To the square.”

“Oh dear, if it’s got anything grizzly to do with people being hanged, you can count us out,” she replied adamantly. “That kind of thing gives us the heebie-jeebies.”

What?

“The heebie-jeebies.”

Bless me, what do they teach them at these schools?

“The collywobbles? Oh, never mind. It scares us and makes us feel physically ill.”

“Oh, we're sorry about that. But no, it’s nothing of the kind. It will be a marvellous spectacle.”

“What will be a marvellous spectacle?”

Jonathan shook his head. “We’d rather not say. That would spoil the surprise.”

“Oh, we see. And again, we don’t see. But we’ll come along if you want us to.”

“Cathy Morris will be there,” Jonathan reliably informed her.

Well, that was reassuring.

“And how would you know that?” she asked. She wasn't aware that the two even knew one-another.

“We just know, that’s all,” he replied. “So please come, or we’ll miss all the excitement.”

63. The Rally

There were already large crowds standing in the square when they arrived, even though they were early, and Harold saw that there were a great many flags being held aloft, bearing the orange hexagon on a plain black background, the state symbol of the Hive.

Quite why the people were gathered here at this particular time, nobody seemed to know. And indeed, the Queen Herself was unaware of what was going on, as she stood at one of the windows overlooking the square and peered out through a gap in the orange and black velvet curtains.

She must have been spotted, because one or two of the crowd were pointing in Her direction now and more and more the crowd began to cheer and wave their flags.

Word must have spread through the grapevine that she'd thwarted the Vizier's treasonous plans and had come here to show her their appreciation.

It was heartwarming to see them rally to show their support.

She turned away from the window and let the curtain fall back into place. "Parker," she called out to her faithful butler. "Get Ames and Carter to quickly write a rousing speech and the role played in thwarting the Vizier's evil schemes."

The man bowed and hurried off toward the offices.

Thirty minutes later and the Queen could see that the crowd had by now filled almost the entire square, and someone standing at the top of the steps with a megaphone was getting the ones at the front to squeeze together a little more, and eventually people who'd been trying to get into the square were finally able to do so.

They were becoming a little impatient now, chanting "Why are we waiting?", but this was soon drowned out by a rousing mass rendition of *Hive of Plenty*.

"Better hurry them up," the Queen requested. Then, "and get someone to check the loudspeaker system, would you. I don't want any technical hitches."

Parker bowed, swiftly leaving the room and heading back to

the offices.

"Looks like they're expecting an appearance," Harold remarked, cupping his hand to Max's ear so that his words would not be drowned out by the loud and patriotic singing.

"Take more than that to satisfy them," Max replied. "I've heard one or two calling for a speech."

Nanny had arrived by this time, and she was astounded by the scene. Well, there was little point in looking around for Cathy in such a crowd.

All the same, she tapped in the number, which she knew from memory but never wrote down or saved, and scanned the crowd. But of course she was quite short in comparison with most of the others, so she couldn't see that many faces.

Jonathan dragged her over to the memorial near the centre of the crowd, and managed to convince two of the current occupants to give up their places for Nanny. They helpfully obliged and she thanked them.

She tried again and got an answer this time. "Hello, Cathy. Where are you right now? Tell you what, there's no point in jumping up and down and waving. We're standing by the memorial. Yes, meet us there. Thanks. Bye."

Nanny put the phone away and waited until Cathy had negotiated the crowds. Actually, it didn't take that long for her to find them. Members of the crowd readily gave way to the young lady.

Just then, Cathy's own phone rang and she answered it.

"Nettie," she informed Nanny Hayes.

That meant people from the Network.

"Maybe tell her to call back later. Tell her that we're otherwise engaged."

Jonathan shook his head. "Do you mean Harold Grainger?" he asked.

Oh, dear Alicia.

Had the crowd not been so noisy, you could otherwise have heard a pin drop, and she and Cathy exchanged nervous glances.

"Just trust us, will you," the boy requested, and it wasn't a question.

Shortly afterwards, Jonathan pointed someone out. Two bald-headed men. And it looked like they were heading this way.

As the two men approached, though unsure of quite what to do, Nanny gave them a wave. “Cooey!” she said. And she quickly introduced everybody. “Cousin Harold, lovely to see you.”

She wasn’t sure which of the two men was Harold Grainger, but fortunately he came forward to greet her with a hug and a genuine, not feigned, kiss on the cheek.

“This is Max, an old friend,” he smiled.

Cathy was clearly thinking on her feet, too. “We’re Cathy Morris, this is Nanny Hayes, and the young man is Master Jonathan Potter.”

“Glad to meet you all,” both men said in near unison, shaking hands with the others. “Big occasion, eh?”

Fortunately, Cathy had briefed them about recent events, and Harold already knew the names. Now he could put those names to actual live faces.

Just then they heard a change in the sound of the crowd and there was applause, so they cut their conversation short.

The Queen had come out on one of the upper balconies, flanked by a couple of men in uniform, their jackets weighed down by a profusion of medals.

Finally, as the Queen coughed politely into the microphone and one of the men raised his hand, palm outwards to call for silence, the crowd gradually quietened down to no more than a low murmur, and even that faded when their neighbours shushed them.

Only now did Nanny realise that Jonathan had slipped away. For a moment she thought she saw his head in the crowd, moving closer to the front, but then she lost him again.

The Queen began her long speech by laying out broad details of the treasonous plot against Her and the Authorities.

Even after delivering only these few words, many in the congregation were cheering and waving their flags patriotically.

Once this din had died down again, the Queen went on to tell them that, having discovered the plot, one of the Vizier's senior aides, a heroic woman by the name of Crosby had been murdered.

°That’s not true!° she thought. And this point, there was a most peculiar change in the reaction of the crowd, with several voices calling out with much the same words.

Perhaps not hearing this reaction, the Queen went on

unperturbed, informing them that it was the Vizier who had the aide murdered, because she had discovered that he was behind the treasonous plot against the Monarchy.

Again, she thought, °That's a damn lie!°

Within moments, though there were sympathetic responses and much flag-waving, there were more and more cries of discontent, calling her a liar. And several attempts were made to get others chanting, "Liar! Liar! Pants on fire!"

When the Queen informed them that she had had the Vizier executed, and that she had instigated an investigation and a purge within the palace and beyond, there were more and more cries of "Liar!" and "Shame!" and even "Traitor!", "Despot!", "Down with the Monarchy!" and "Death to the Queen!"

And the Queen must surely have heard these cries and the chanting that followed.

The two men in uniform were huddled together in an impromptu conference now. They spoke briefly to the Queen and as an alarm bell sounded in the palace complex the Queen retreated from the balcony, followed by the uniformed men.

A few moments later, they could see a contingent of Royal Guards emerging from the building and lining up along the top steps leading into an entrance hall, and then someone came back out onto the balcony and spoke loudly into the microphone, urging the onlookers to disperse quietly and peacefully.

The crowd had grown loud and rowdy at this point and the person on the balcony demanded that they disperse and return to their homes or they would be shot.

Well, that did it. In a diametrically opposed way, that is. The crowd surged forward, using their patriotic flag poles as weapons and, after a tussle, but thankfully as yet no shots, the Royal Guards retreated inside the building.

"Off with her head!" and "Hang the witch!" the crowd was chanting wildly by now, and the few who dissented were creeping off to get away from the square.

Attempts were made to close and bar the entrance, but these efforts came too late. Hopelessly outnumbered, the Guards were overwhelmed, and hundreds flooded through the main entrance and also through other entrances in the Vizier's wing.

Nanny later discovered that many of the Royal Guard and

military had defected to the side of this popular uprising, and sadly it soon became a bloody affair, mostly down to the brutal fanaticism of the Loyalist factions.

At this point, Nanny saw that young Jonathan had returned to their side.

“I think it’s time to go now, don’t you?” the boy suggested oh-so-innocently. And he was addressing these words not to Nanny Hayes but to Harold Grainger.

And the very next day, Her Royal High and Mightiness, the Queen Bee, had joined the former-Vizier on the scaffold in the centre of the square.

64. A Course Correction

Having climbed the long rope ladder, which John had found something of a challenge due to a combination of fatigue and unfamiliarity, they were safely onboard the ship, and after exchanging warm greetings with Sophia, the lady captain, one of the crew led them below deck in the direction of the galley to fill their aching stomachs, rehydrate, and get warm.

They heard a rattling that sounded to Rowan like they were weighing anchor ready to sail, and then a deeper rumble, mixed in with some chatter, and it looked like they must already be under way.

A few minutes later, Sophia came down to the galley, grabbed herself a large mug of black coffee and sat down to join them. For a time they talked about their experiences on the island and she told them about what had been going on at her end since they'd picked up the distress call. Sophia also mentioned a network that she was involved in, which sounded a little clandestine, but didn't go into any detail. Anyhow, Rowan was happy with what he'd heard and content that they'd be brought more fully into the picture soon enough.

Later, they were shown into a cabin. The others had probably been expecting bunks, but Rowan saw that they'd be sleeping in hammocks. He explained to John that there would be less danger of falling out in a storm and that unlike static bunks these would sway with the ship, reducing the risk of seasickness. When he heard the word storm, however, John looked less than happy.

Another thing Rowan noticed was that wherever he went, even when he paid a call at the head, as the toilet was called, John's pack never once left his shoulder or his side. Of course, tucked away safely inside the pack, John was carrying what to him was the most precious of all their belongings, his phone containing the photographs of the *Treasury*, wrapped in several thick layers of protective material, and the Prof would guard it with his life.

Going out on deck after they'd been fed and watered and had a long rest, Rowan was expecting that they would be many miles

out to sea by now, steering a course to the south-east toward Narayana, as had been originally planned. So he was surprised to see that they were still hugging the coast, with the mainland clearly visible on the starboard side (to the right). So they must be heading south.

"Rough weather out east?" he enquired, stepping into the bridge and closing the door behind him.

The Captain turned round and greeted him with a smile. "No, just a change of plan," she informed him. Then she crossed the bridge, opened up the medicine cabinet and proceeded to pour three glasses of an amber-looking liquid, offering one to him, one to the seaman who was at the helm, and one for herself. She held out the small bottle and slipped it into his coat pocket. "This will warm the cockles of your heart. Take the rest of the bottle and pass it round your friends," she said.

"Thanks. Change of plans?" he enquired, taking a sip of the drink. "Wow, this stuff is good."

"We're well past the border beyond the reach of Kvinslandia, you'll be more than glad to hear." She tipped her head in the direction of the coast. "And the land that you see is Hodweir. You may know it as the Outlands."

"I have to admit that I don't know it at all," he confessed. "I've led a sheltered life. We've all led sheltered lives. If you can even call it life in Kvinslandia."

"You can tell us all about that later, Rowan. There's much for us to learn, too.

"We'll be putting in at a port further south to take on fuel, and we might as well grab some more provisions while we're at it. The Director of the Network, Tenzing, relayed a request for a few things that are in short supply."

"And from there?" he prompted.

Sophia shrugged. "Your guess is good as mine. By the time we get there, we'll probably receive further orders."

Rowan had just begged leave and was heading back to the others. He'd been sorely neglecting his beloved Holly since they first set foot on the island.

"One more thing," he felt he should mention. "If anything happens – though I trust that it won't – make sure that John, the lanky guy who looks like a swat, is kept safe. At all costs. He's

carrying something extremely valuable."

Sophia laughed. "Ah, I'd actually noticed that he kept his pack close-by at all times. I thought maybe it was like a security blanket."

"Just kidding," she added. "And have no fear, I will certainly bear that in mind."

65. Southward Bound

Max led the others back toward his flat, but he warned Harold that it would be dangerous for them all to be seen there. So the two of them left the others in the shadows nearby while Harold Grainger grabbed his suitcase, which he had still not unpacked, thanked Max and said a fond farewell. He also promised that next time round, he'd bring him a bottle of Tenzing's special reserve. Of course, he had offered Max a seat in the car, but the old boy was too settled in Kvinslandia, at least for now. The offer would always be open, Harold assured him, as he stepped into the car.

He turned the corner, pulled into the side of the road, flashed his headlights three times, and Cathy Morris, Sally Hayes and young Jonathan came running. And, wanting to get out of the capital, Avilys, as soon as possible, Harold quickly drove away, Sally and Cathy in the back and Jonathan, his co-pilot, up front with him.

The lad had been adamant that he wasn't going anywhere without Nanny Hayes. And she and Cathy had been happy to go along with them and leave Kvinslandia behind, until things had at least settled down.

Harold was not at all sure how they would get across the border, and he had serious misgivings. Border control was tight, though he did have the address of a safe house further south.

A thought popped into his mind just then. °Everything will be fine.°

That's easy for you to say, he told himself.

He was in two minds about this. They were coming to an intersection and he slowed, as yet unsure of which route he should take. Straight on to the border post or right in the direction of the safe house. Fortunately, there was little traffic on the roads. Not even police cars, thanks be to Alicia.

°Straight on,° his inner voice prompted him, just as he was indicating that he was turning right, and he wrenched the wheel of the car back to the left without even thinking about it.

He glanced at Jonathan in the seat beside him, and the lad

just smiled.

Harold was performing calculations. On the way in he'd passed through a barrier across the road that they lowered to block the way and raised with the aid of a counterweight to allow access. If it was made of wood, he might be able to crash through it, and on the far side they would be safely in Hodweir which did not have its own border control.

But if it was made of iron or steel, even this sturdy old battle wagon might be scrunched and not make it through.

Of course, Cathy and Jonathan could make a run for it. But, glancing at the others in the rear view mirror, he worried that Nanny Hayes and he would not fair so well.

Against his own better judgement, or perhaps against his own paranoid judgement, Harold drove on, and as they approach the crossing point, he slowed down and braced himself for whatever might happen next.

Jonathan had found the handle in the door and he was winding down the window on his side, on the left.

The barrier was down, and as he pulled up in front of it, a border guard came out of his small wooden hut, rubbing his hands together as he approached them. There was a nip in the air, even the chance of frost.

The man came across and bent down to peer inside the car. "Papers, please," he requested curtly.

Harold opened the glove compartment and reached inside. And he could feel his right hand trembling.

He had papers for himself, of course, but the others had none.

And he realised that having foolishly pulled up so close to the barrier, he could not make a run for it. The car would instead push up against the barrier as he hit the accelerator, and the back wheels would spin excitedly in the gravel, going precisely nowhere.

The guard took his papers and examined them before handing them back.

"And the rest of the papers, if you will," the man requested, reaching into the car with his hand held out, palm uppermost.

Harold could feel a terrible lump rising in his throat. Dear Alicia, if only Tenzing were here, he would know what to do. In fact, he wouldn't have got them in this mess in the first place.

“My friends have no papers,” he found himself croaking.

°Phone headquarters,° an inner voice prompted, though it was prompting the guard and obviously not him. °We’re on an urgent mission of mercy.°

The guard withdrew his hand and scratched the back of his head.

“Turn off your engine, pass me the keys, and stay here,” the man said at length.

Harold could do nothing other than comply.

The guard took the keys, turned on his heel and went back to his wooden hut, and through the window they could see him put a phone to his ear and start talking.

A few moments later, the guard came rushing out, his face flushed.

He ran to the car, an anxious look creasing his features. “Bugger me!” the guard gasped, breathlessly. “There’s been an uprising and Avilys has fallen! And it’s spreading right across the country.”

°I should get back home to my family straight away!° cried an insistent inner voice that they all heard.

The guard cast his arms in the air. “We? I? I don’t know what’s what anymore.”

It was as if some dark spell had been broken.

Immediately the man turned and tossed the keys in through the open window of the car. And without a further word, he ran off down the road.

By this time, Jonathan was already out of the car and, with a great effort, he managed to raise the barrier. As Harold turned the key in the ignition, hoping and praying that the car would start, the boy jumped back in the car and slammed the door behind him.

And with that, they drove off down the rough and badly maintained road over the border into Hodweir.

“See,” the young lad beamed. “I told you that everything would be fine.”

Yes. There was something special about that boy. Something very special indeed. Tenzing would be greatly interested in him; and Mair Freida doubly so.

66. Making Land

They'd arrived at a small port on the coast of Hodweir. It had once been full of herring boats, Sophia had told them as Rowan and Holly accompanied her, arm in arm, along the quayside in the fresh sea air. The town, once a bustling seaside resort, had also seen better days. And as they walked up town with Will and John to help Sophia out with the supplies while her crew got the ship refuelled, they could see a number of boarded up shops, especially down by the harbour in the old town.

Though long after the last war, the country had still not recovered and was decades behind the times, too. They'd picked the wrong side in the war and ended up on the wrong side of history, you see, and after the war was lost, what was now the Freelands still had trade sanctions imposed on the country, and reparations were still being paid. That took a great toll on the country, and especially the desperate people of Hodweir.

This, then, was one of the reasons that the Network was operating. Not least to smuggle needy folk across the border from Hodweir into the Freelands, so called. For as well as the trade barriers, there were also strict border controls.

Nothing new under the sun, Rowan mused.

Having been round the town centre at least twice and collected the supplies, none of which were heavy or perishable, thankfully, they again made their way back down the main street toward the harbour. Then, having deposited the provisions onboard, Sophia took the four of them across the road to one of the local taverns on the foreshore that stood facing the beach. Apart from anything else, the landlady would no doubt welcome the trade.

Sophia stood to one side and waved them inside, Holly clutching his hand tightly and half-dragging Rowan in. She was excited by all these new sights and fresh experiences.

For a time they stood in the centre of the bar, admiring the old oak beams and whitewashed walls, the bright orange crab pots, framed paintings of sea faring, and all manner of other ornamentation, and then, following Sophia's lead, they tore

themselves away and made a beeline for the bar.

Sophia asked them what they were drinking and suggested that Will and John should reserve one of the tables in a quiet niche near a window to the right of the bar. And they were amazed to find that having ordered, one of the barmaids would bring their drinks over to them. There was also a large blackboard to one side of the bar, with a menu written in white chalk, offering a short but appetising list of food available. So they headed for the table and they'd decide on food while their drinks were being poured.

"I should point out that the ale here is particularly strong," Sophia advised, removing her captain's peaked cap and shaking out her long blond hair. "I'm officially off duty now, but don't follow my lead. I'm used to the local ale, but you need to pace yourselves or the crew will have to come to carry you back onboard."

Holly was still gazing around. On every wall and in every corner of the old tavern there was something to feast her eyes upon. Not least the real oak surface of the tables and matching chairs. I mean, real wood on public display and real ale freely available. She eventually released Rowan's hand, suddenly realising that she'd still been clasping it so tightly.

She was about to say something, and Sophia anticipated her. "Don't worry, I promised the crew that they could have a few hours off once we get back. I would have let them stay out late, but we're still awaiting orders."

Holly and John had had more than sufficient ale by the time they'd finished their lobster, peas and fried potatoes, which was the day's special, but Sophia, Rowan, and Will managed to find room for a second.

And then, sadly, it was time to leave the quaint little town behind.

When they got back to the ship, the four of them waited on deck while the Captain had a brief word with her crew and checked her watch, and the men grabbed their coats from the hooks in the bridge and trotted off toward the gangplank.

"I'll have to stay topside to mind the ship," Sophia advised them, with a twinkle in her eye. "But you go down below. If you need a nap or something to eat or drink – or whatever – just make

yourselves at home."

Will and John stayed topside for a while, most likely to clear their heads in the fresh sea air. There was such a delightful tang of salt and seaweed that would later conjure up vivid memories of the seaside.

As they descended the ladder and Holly led Rowan through to the galley, she caught sight of some unexpected arrivals.

She was just about to step forward to greet the three adults, an older man and woman and a younger woman, when she caught sight of the fourth.

Overcome with emotion, Holly had to clutch hold of Rowan's arm for support for fear that she might faint on the spot. And the tears streamed from her face as never before.

Rowan had taken in the situation by now, too, and he gripped Holly's hand tightly and put his left arm around her head, cradling it against his chest. She glanced up at him, and saw that while not openly crying, his own eyes were filling up.

Holly pulled herself together, bit her lip, and turned back round.

Harold Grainger was on his feet by now and he motioned to Cathy Morris, and the two of them shuffled past Rowan and Holly.

Patting her on the shoulder as he went, the man said. "Very glad to meet you. We'll be back in a few minutes, but right now you need to have some time alone."

Jonathan edged forward now, still clutching hold of Nanny Hayes' hand, and she rose to her feet and followed, slightly behind him.

Holly managed to finally get the words out, though she was all choked up inside. "Oh, Jonathan. Jonathan. It is so good to see you. You don't know how much this means to us. There hasn't been a single moment that I haven't been thinking about you, and worrying about you, and ..."

Again she broke down in tears and Rowan rested his hands on her heaving shoulders.

Nanny Hayes slipped out of the galley now, squeezing past Rowan, and the three of them were alone for the first time in ages. Perhaps together for the first time in many years. Those days so long ago when she and the happy toddler had excitedly

fed the ducks and, for a time, she could relax and cast her cares aside.

Jonathan didn't say anything. Perhaps the poor lad couldn't say anything, or couldn't find the words to express himself.

But that didn't really matter. As she held her arms wide and Rowan stepped round to her side, Jonathan took a step forward and then suddenly flung himself into her arms, and the three of them just stood and hugged one-another for a long, glorious moment. It was as if time itself had been put on pause.

"I'm sorry," young Jonathan said, eventually pulling free, but gently so.

Rowan nodded. "And we're sorry, too."

At this point, the others slowly filtered back into the galley, as if responding to some silent signal, and while Nanny Hayes fixed them a good strong coffee, they all sat down together and they each told their part in this wonderful story. It was like sewing a many-coloured patchwork quilt together, or weaving a tapestry.

Hours had perhaps passed. They'd all lost track of the time. And then the Captain appeared. "Ahoy there, shipmates," she called from the entrance into the galley. "Time to weigh anchor."

"Where are we off now?" Jonathan wanted to know.

"Over the sea and far away, young man," she laughed. Addressing the new arrivals, she apologised. "Excuse my manners. I'll be back later to properly welcome you once we're out of the bay."

Then she turned round and hurried back to the bridge while the crew cast off and got the ship under way.

67. The Long Journey

It was a relatively long voyage sailing due east, but the fellowship, whose ranks had now swollen to eight, had still not run out of things to talk about and tales to tell. Out from under the shadow of the Hive, all pretence had been dropped. Even young Jonathan had clearly lost any fear or revulsion at the use of the personal pronoun. As had been noted before, though Holly forgot by whom, it was as if a dark spell had been broken, and after all these long years. “Hope is born of lack of hope,” as some sage had once wisely said.

As for John, he was more guarded, and she wasn’t sure how much to divulge about Silas when it came to the statue with the pointing finger and the cryptic legend chiselled into the base. Let alone the Treasure.

She had noticed that Prof had taken his phone out of its protective wrappings, and with the help of the more technically-savvy Will, they’d located a charger behind the counter in the galley, a wall socket that they presumed was safe, and right now his phone, which contained the precious photographs, was being charged back up again. She did hear him exchanging quiet words with Will, however. The Prof was concerned that he only had the one copy of the photographs, and he wouldn’t be happy until they’d been transferred to another device, or preferably another two. Will had advised him that though that was something to think about later, it wasn’t a big deal. However, still unsatisfied, Prof had further words with Rowan. And the happy outcome of that was that once his own phone was recharged as well, they could tether the two phones together using a charging lead from the disrupter, which he still had in his pocket, and they could then copy the photo gallery across to his phone. And thankfully that set Prof’s mind at ease.

Of course, none of this had escaped the eagle-eyed Jonathan – or perhaps his inner ear – and it wasn’t long before he had the Prof in conversation and was gently feeling his way around the subject. Given the importance of the Treasury, she had expected Prof to shy away from the topic, and she was dreading the

moment when the man told Jonathan point blank to stay out of things that didn't concern him.

She was surprised, then, that Prof actually began to talk openly of the treasure and how they'd come to find it, and the others listened with growing interest. And, having clearly established a close friendship, once both phones had been charged and the photos copied to Rowan's device – which Prof told him to guard with his life – he brought up one of the photos on the screen and showed it to Jonathan before showing it to each of the others. And he explained a little, but not all, that he knew of the message behind the treasury that Silas had originally told them.

Jonathan had another look at one of the first pages from the book and you could tell by his wide-eyed expression that he was greatly interested in finding out what all the strange words meant.

"So you're going to translate the book, then," Jonathan asked rhetorically. "Maybe I can help."

Prof nodded vigorously. "Yes, a bright young man like you, I'm quite sure that you can. That can be our first priority once we're back in civilisation."

Civilisation? She mused. That would be a fine thing.

John stood up at this point, and he fished in his coat pocket. Then he went round the table, reaching out to each one of them in turn and pressing something into their hand. When it was her turn, Holly looked down to see a small, shiny gold coin resting in her palm.

"A little memento," Prof smiled, returning to his seat, and they all offered him their thanks.

Even good things must come to an end, however, and all too soon they had landed at a port to the north-east of Narayana and it was time to express their profound gratitude and sadly bid Captain Sophia and her trusty crew a fond farewell.

Harold Grainger usually travelled by car, south from Foxholes in the Freelands over the bleak moorland, west through the great forests and the tiny principality of Lilith, before turning north again and travelling up through Narayana and across the vast central plateau or plains. And then northward still further into the mountains.

But on this occasion they faced a very long and boring bus ride west from the coast, without the freedom to talk about

matters of any consequence. The native people were more than friendly, of course, and the party marvelled at the women's long, brightly patterned and embroidered dresses. Some wore light scarves over their heads, too, though many, especially the younger women, chose to go bare-headed. Most of them had dark brown hair and brown eyes, but many had black hair and blue or even wonderful deep green eyes. And the men, too, though wearing plainer traditional clothes, were pretty easy-going. There wasn't the same hustle and bustle that there would have been in the Freelands. Again, like Hodweir, their culture lagged far behind, but these people were proud and though they weren't rich, at least not in material goods, nor were they wretchedly poor or malnourished. The vast central plains were the nation's breadbasket and they produced a multitude of rich crops and supported a great many livestock.

Eventually they did reach Shakra, a town at the north-eastern-most extent of the central plains. A market town, this was perhaps the most bustling part of Narayana, or one of the busiest, at any rate. This is where their bus terminated, and where Tenzing, he (Harold), or Rosalie would leave their own cars for fear of seriously damaging the vehicles' suspension.

At Shakra, the others got to meet Wilbur Jones who would radio ahead so that they could make preparations for their journey to, and arrival at, the Network's mountain retreat at Babs Chu.

Wilbur Jones was a funny little man with a shiny bald head, though his hair was uncommonly long at the back; and he wore thick-lensed spectacles which made it appear as if he had two huge and very attentive eyeballs almost popping out of their sockets when he looked at you. He put his bad eyesight down to the many years he'd spent working on the minute and intricate mechanisms of watches and clocks and later pouring over a hot soldering iron, repairing wireless sets. He was an amateur radio enthusiast and on his wall he had postcards from a great many friends that he'd contacted throughout the world over the years.

That task completed, they faced a spine-jerking six hour bus trip over heavily rutted, twisty roads to Renchok. And that didn't please anyone at all, least of all poor old Jonathan. He was feeling a bit sick, so Harold had him sit on a folded newspaper. Whether that was an old wives' tale, something to do with the build-up of

static electricity, or a mere placebo, or not, nevertheless that did the trick.

Finally, they arrived at Renchok, a small town nestling in the shelter at the foot of a steep, rock-strewn valley, and the journey became more exciting from here.

Once they'd relieved their bodily urges nearby at an icy-cold toilet block, and begun to walk off their stiff legs and backsides, they reached the inn at Renchok, famous for its peculiar old stone and timber-framed design. One of the first things Holly noticed about the fabric of the place, as everyone with eyes always did, was that everything appeared to be slightly out of alignment. The windows were all slightly crooked, with frames that were not quite level. And once inside, she could see that the passageways and corners of the rooms were not quite square. And they all marvelled at the bright and intricate designs of the carpets that lined some of the walls, which were woven to perfection, though they found it a little strange that the carpets should be hanging on the walls of the building rather than on the floor which was made of smooth flagstones and liberally sprinkled with sawdust.

By now famished, Harold booked them into rooms. There were no en-suite bathroom facilities or other luxuries, of course, but there were lovely soft beds with fluffy pillows, lots of warm blankets, and an eiderdown on top, and the food was out of this world.

Two of the students would normally be meeting them in a couple of days (they never travelled alone in the mountains), but Sophia must have contacted Shakra when they first reached port, or perhaps radioed while they were still at sea, and he was pleasantly surprised to see that Tenzing had accurately timed their arrival and that students were already waiting for them.

First things first, though, after a quick wash: first eat, then talk, as a wise man once advised.

They were famished, and the students were hungry, too, having just made the long trek from Babs Chu. Fortunately the students reported that the wind was from the west and that the weather was clear. Of course, in this region the weather could change for the better or for the worse overnight, and quite without warning.

Finally, Harold checked his watch with one of the students

and corrected it to allow for the time difference. And since they would have to make a start very early the next day, he suggested that they all grab an early night.

There were two single beds in the small room that Harold had thoughtfully allocate for Rowan and Holly; he, Jonathan, Will and John would sleep in a second room that had bunk beds in it; Cathy and Sally would share a third room with another young lady from Lilith; and the two students were happy enough to sleep in a dormitory with others in the newly-built extension behind the inn.

As for Holly and Rowan, they made the most of this delightful mini break, relishing the comfort of the bed after spending so long on the hard earth at the camp site. They also used this heaven-sent opportunity to renew their sadly neglected acquaintance. And just like the first time they had made love, all those years ago when Rowan was still a straight and a rookie, the absolute darling came back for seconds, and they both thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it. It was like having a second honeymoon. Or perhaps a first, since they had never been married. And that was something else for Holly to quietly think about. Perhaps even scheme about with the very affable Nanny Hayes.

All too soon, however, and most likely before the cock crowed, if they kept such fowl up here, they were awakened by one of the students who came politely knocking on their door. “Rise and shine and show a leg there,” he chirped.

Downstairs they helped themselves to the cold breakfast that the landlady had thoughtfully prepared for them the night before, as Harold had arranged. And then the students went to fetch the two mules and single horse from the stables while Harold kitted them all out with layers of warmer clothing, decent boots, balaclavas, hats, gloves, and walking poles. Thankfully, they rented a small outhouse at the inn that was always kept stocked up with stores, so they managed to find something to fit each of them, more or less. Had they been fewer in number they might have ridden on horseback part of the way, but on this occasion they'd have to go on foot, with the exception of Nanny, but at least the mules could take several of the packs. As for John, he would part with his precious pack for neither love nor money.

Rowan, too, made sure that he kept his phone safe and secure in the left inside pocket of his coat.

And then, without further ado, let alone any fanfare, pomp or ceremony, once Nanny Hayes was astride the dappled mare, they were off.

68. Babs Chu

The first part of the journey, following the banks of a swirling river that meandered its way down the lush valley, was easy going and it was quite pleasant when the sun shone down on them, if a little nippy in the shade. They climbed for what seemed like an eternity, until the town they'd left behind was little more than a tiny splodge of paint on a vast mottled landscape, and yet ahead of them she could see taller mountains, still peaked with snow even at this time of year.

For two long days they climbed into the mountains, setting up four small bivouacs on the first night with a camp-fire in their lee fuelled with bricks of dried out yak dung that the two students had left ready for the ascent on their way down the mountains.

On the second day, they had to take a narrow path which ran around one of the mountains and John was quite unnerved by the drop beneath him. It wasn't a sheer drop, it was actually a slope, but he knew that if he slipped on the loose scree, he'd tumble several hundred feet down to the small, dark blue tarn at the bottom. More than that, though, he was worried about his precious pack. Nanny Hayes had to dismount at this point, and they made sure that they were all safely roped together. The mules didn't seem to mind the height and were pretty sure-footed, but there were places where even they had to be carefully led. They were pretty high up in the mountains now. The air was becoming more rarefied and they hadn't had any time to acclimatise. So even something as simple as walking became something of an effort for them. They simply couldn't get enough oxygen to the muscles of their aching legs. and Holly could feel her head swimming a little.

They didn't know it yet, but they were getting closer to their destination now, and once they were on safer ground, Harold stopped and turned round. He signalled to the two students and he had them rope the others together, pull thick black blindfolds down over their eyes, and lead them. Harold always regretted having to do this, but it was vital that newcomers not know the whereabouts of Babs Chu. If it were ever discovered it would

cause irreparable harm, and that was a risk he dare not take. One of the students walked on behind now, making sure that their steps were quietly erased as he went.

At length, they descended a little into the lee of the mountains and out of the biting wind that had sprung up. Ahead of them lay a wide lake, fed by a broad waterfall that cascaded down a cliff from above, and they took a gentle path toward the lake, at which point the blindfolds were removed and they rested for a few minutes while the others became re-accustomed to the bright snow, and they shared a drink of *chungari* before moving on.

Quite why they should be going this way, Holly couldn't say, as the valley they had been trudging up appeared to be a deserted cul-de-sac. Yet on they walked.

At the far end there was the waterfall, and they walked along a narrow path around its left flank until they were standing almost beneath the roaring torrent, the air thick with stray drops and water vapour. And yet, again Holly couldn't see any way out of this valley.

Harold walked straight ahead all the same, beneath overhanging rocks, then turned sharply to his right and disappeared behind the curtain of water. And it became clear to Holly and then to the others that behind the curtain of the waterfall was a long, winding tunnel through the mountain. Harold carried one torch, and as they moved on, she saw that there were more that had been slotted into angled holders fastened to the tunnel walls, and he lit each in turn; the second student snuffing them out as he following up in the rear.

Finally they were out, and they had to squint for some time until they again became accustomed to the bright light.

Holly couldn't believe her eyes when she finally looked down, and clearly the others were equally gobsmacked. Before, them, and stretching for many miles was a low, wide valley ringed by snow-laden mountain peaks, like the jagged body and tail of a huge dragon, curled up and fast asleep. And across the valley floor she could make out a patchwork of different coloured fields.

John asked about this anomaly and Harold explained that there was lot of geothermal activity in the area, and so the valley

thankfully had a microclimate.

Over to her left, in the distance, not far from a river that wound its way from one end of the valley to the other, were what looked like old ruins. Rowan took out the old brass compass that the tracker had been carrying, and which he'd requisitioned, and he peered through it and passed it round. And there were buildings beyond that, on slightly higher ground.

"Welcome to Abshar," Harold beamed. "Or *babs chu* as we fondly call it."

Once their eyes had had their fill, Harold slowly led them down a long narrow path that zig-zagged its way toward the valley floor. They were high up, but the slope was not too severe and there was little chance of falling, though Rowan did go back to make sure that Sally Hayes was in safe hands.

At the bottom, they took a breather, because none of them, including Harold Grainger, was as yet acclimatised to the mountain air.

Then they pressed on along a wider and wonderful winding and scrunchy gravel path, through an old stone archway and past all manner of gardens growing vegetables, herbs, and brightly-coloured flowers. There were people working in the gardens, too, and as they passed, these people stood up from their work and warmly greeted these new arrivals.

As they walked on, they approached a collection of little buildings with steeply-sloping roofs, and Harold pointed out an arts and crafts workshop, a bathhouse and toilet facilities, and several others, and then a number of chalets where they'd be able to stay.

"Peter Adams will show you to your chalets later today, as Tenzing is expecting us and will surely have briefed the staff," Harold told them. "And you'll be very glad to hear that we have electricity and hot running water here, thanks to one of our people who installed a small hydroelectric generator."

That was a huge relief.

"Mrs Rowling, the cook, will no doubt have something ready for us later this afternoon. Usually, Tenzing would entertain you and we'd eat in his study – that's in the community centre, the large building that we're heading towards now – but given that there are so many of us, we'll go meet and greet in his study, then

probably eat in the cafeteria. Had we been at our rambling study centre Foxholes in the Freelands, we could have adjourned to the Wayfarer's Rest at the top of the hill."

They came to a set of wide, curved marble steps now, climbed them, and followed Harold into the magnificent building.

"Anyhow, you'll probably want to powder your noses and get a quick wash first of all, and one of the students will show you the way. So I'll go off to brief Tenzing and we'll meet back in the entrance hall in – what? – thirty minutes, give or take a few. Okay? Well, see you again soon, then."

Tenzing greeted them individually and warmly as they entered his study, standing to one side of the door as they entered, and you could feel everyone almost immediately relax as they came into his presence. Holly knew then that he wasn't some dry academic or dispassionate scientist – though judging by his extensive book collection he was clearly well-read – she knew from the very start that he had a deeply spiritual aura.

They talked about all manner of subjects without as yet delving too far into the murky depths. Tenzing was getting to know each of them better, and getting an overall feel for their situation. And this helped Holly, too. In fact, that probably went for everybody, including Jonathan who had said very little as yet. That might be a long process, taking one small step after another after another. And as those thoughts crossed her mind, she saw that Tenzing was watching her intently. He smiled, but unlike Jonathan he did not immediately avert his eyes.

Then, checking his silver pocket watch, Tenzing suggested they went off to the cafeteria to get something to eat after the long journey. And the cook, Mrs Rowling, had certainly done them proud.

They ate in near silence, savouring every delicious mouthful, and only after they'd finished did their talk touch on deeper issues. But rather than chat in the cafeteria, since there were one or two other students not far from their tables, Tenzing invited them all back to his study and he brought out a bottle of *chungari* from his special reserve. He'd invited someone else along, too, an older lady by the name of Mair Freida. It turned out that she was a healer and she managed a small ward in a medical wing with a few students helping her out and one or two of them learning her

craft.

And they talked, and talked, and talked, well into the evening. Until in fact Nanny Hayes was dozing off and it was past young Jonathan's bedtime. So Tenzing thought it best if they wrapped up for the night and went to get a shower if they wanted one, and a good night's rest.

As soon became clear, they actually needed several two-hour-long sessions, each taking turns but with all present, before they'd covered the many stories they had to tell. Tenzing listened attentively to every word, and asked some very perceptive and important questions, while a secretary sitting by his side transcribed it all in shorthand, and it would two of the office staff and one of the students who understood shorthand an age to type it all up. Of course, thought Will and Rowan, they could have taped the conversations, but Tenzing was an old-fashioned sort of guy and that's the way he liked to work. And what's more, though he was by no means bound to any one approach, his methods invariably yielded results.

By this time, Mair Freida, who sat in on many of these meetings, had formed a good friendship with Sally Hayes who was ever at young Jonathan's side, and Mair Freida had also taken a shine to the boy, so they came to spend quite a lot of time together and got to know one-another better.

A little later, after Prof had opened up and explained things to Tenzing, and the Director had put him in touch with one of their technical staff, Prof now had a small office and not one but two computers all to himself, so he could begin work on his translations. This was a project that Tenzing took a special interest in, and he spent quite a lot of time checking in to see what progress had been made, though without any hint of wishing to rush the Prof. If it took a year, fine, and if it took the next ten years, then that was equally fine by him. Even if it was something that had to be passed on to the next generation to complete, so be it. This "work for the Work" was that important.

Prof didn't have to tell Jonathan that he was busy with the translations, the boy just knew it, and one day he simply turned up at the office as if it was his job to do so.

John was sitting hunched up on his desk, chewing the end of a pencil and occasionally taking a swig of black coffee.

“Do you mind if I help you, Professor?” Jonathan enquired.

The Prof looked up sharply, having been engrossed in his work, but when he saw who it was, he visibly relaxed. “I was wondering when you’d turn up,” he beamed.

“And that’s a good thing,” he thought he’d better add.

“You know, you shouldn’t do that. Chew your pencil, I mean. You’ll get lead poisoning.”

He was about to tell the boy that it wasn’t actually lead in pencils but graphite, but then he had second thoughts. Not the best way to begin a partnership.

“You’re quite right, of course, Jonathan,” he nodded, putting the pencil down, and he pointed to a second swivel seat over by the wall. “Pull up a chair and let’s get started.”

He booted up the second computer.

“So what’s the book all about, Professor?” Jonathan wanted to know.

The Prof had already told him all about Silas and the legend of the pointing finger, and now he told the boy about the *Treasury* itself, in Silas’s own words as best he could remember them, closing his eyes and tracing the words in his mind.

“The tradition that had been handed down to Silas and which he represented had set out in the *Treasury* a vision of an altogether more just and harmonious way of life – and way of being – that they hoped future generations might adopt. In doing so, they bequeathed us a very precious gift. A truly priceless gift, in fact, that must be carefully guarded and preserved at all cost.”

The boy seemed to understand. “That sounds like a very good idea to me, because it’s not a very nice world we’re living in at all, is it, Professor?”

“No, it’s not,” he agreed with a deep sigh, and he went on for a few minutes to give Jonathan an idea of the sort of things that were gravely wrong with the world, as far as he could see, but noticing the look of wide-eyed horror on the boy’s face he stopped, fearing that he’d already said too much.

“It’s a long book,” he explaining to Jonathan, abruptly changing the subject. “The first hundred pages are there to teach the reader – that’s you and me – how to actually understand the language. And there are a lot of pictures, you’ll be glad to hear, to help explain things.

“Then the next two hundred and fifty pages is the *Treasury* itself, written in that language. And that’s where things get very interesting!”

By now the second machine had finished booting up and he brought up the gallery of images in one panel to the left of the screen and a second panel, containing a blank document where you could enter notes, to the right.

He held up his hands. “I won’t kid you: this is no easy task, and it could take a lifetime, but we have to start somewhere. And the place for us to start is on page one.

“I’m sorry, kid. This may not be the way things turn out in movies, but this is how things work in real life.”

“Actually, Professor, I’ll let you into a little secret,” young Jonathan confided, drawing close to John and whispering in his ear, and he pulled something from his right-hand pocket. “Rowan lent me his phone, you see.”

“And?” John prompted, somewhat intrigued.

The boy fished in his inside jacket pocket and brought out a thick spirally-bound notepad. “I’ve worked through the introduction to the book, Professor, and I do believe that I’m getting the hang of it. I’ve already deciphered the first fifty pages of the *Treasury*. Would you like to compare notes?”

Well, how’s that for triumphalism? John gasped. Then he mentally slapped himself. John Coles, that was most uncalled for.

“It’s not all my own work, you understand,” the boy went on.

“How’s that?” Did they have another child prodigy in their midst?

“I had a lot of help from Rifatzada and Banu Zadar.” Then he added, “And in the foreword, their help must be acknowledged.”

“Who are they?” John asked.

Young Jonathan just shrugged. “Just people I know.”

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Two years later, Rosalie was sitting at her desk in her office at Foxholes. She’d already read the book several times from cover to cover, of course, which had left her suitably gobsmacked, and she’d spent the last twelve months alone relaying messages to-and-fro between here and Professors John Coles and Jonathan Potter at Babs Chu.

She did wonder if perhaps Tenzing might find a way to bring
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them to Foxholes, since that would make life a lot easier, but Tenzing had told her that this wasn't as yet indicated. For her part, she trusted his judgement.

She'd made numerous minor corrections and changes to the formatting, of course, but for anything else she'd meticulously checked with the two Jays to ensure that it was a faithful translation of the original text. Sometimes the two of them had argued about the meaning of a word, idiom, or turn of phrase, since she was told that the word order and grammar of the original language was very much different from their own. It also had to be translated for meaning, rather than word for word, which posed additional difficulties as some parts of the book were open to interpretation. Above all, she didn't want them to leave ambiguities in the text that might cause problems later on with literalists and religionists, as had happened all too often in the past.

It was a difficult language for them to decipher and yet a purposely simple and most regular language to learn and use. Perhaps the simplest and yet highly versatile and expandable language in the world, so John had reliably told her. As it turned out, young Jonathan who really was one of the brightest stars in the galaxy, was usually, though not always, right. Sometimes John could be a little stubborn, though he usually came round in the end, without her exerting any pressure on him.

By now, Rosalie had decided that the book simply must include the original text alongside each page for future reference, should the work attract the attention of serious scholars. There was no way they could include so many colour images, however, so at both Foxholes and Babs Chu, they had enlisted an irregular army of volunteers to painstakingly transcribe the complete text including the introduction. Not knowing the language itself, this was a major task in itself, demanding the utmost concentration and attention to detail, including the minutiae such as a circumflex or breve over a letter, and it all had to be done by hand without the aid of a spell checker. They had to go through the text numerous times before they finally had the many, inevitable typos corrected. And still, someone else with a fresh set of eyes would no doubt spot the odd error after the book had been committed to print. That came with the territory, you might say. The inevitable

imperfections were only natural and helped remind them that they were human.

But pulling back for a moment and trying to remind herself of the bigger picture, the discovery of the ancient text and Jonathan's arrival at just the right time and in the right place could not have been in a more perfect alignment. Destiny hadn't simply smiled at them, she had showered them with Gifts of the highest order.

As for Rifatzada and Banu Zadar who got an honourable mention in the foreword, she'd asked Tenzing about that now that he was back at Foxholes and Harold Grainger was taking his turn at Babs Chu, and he slapped his hand down on the desk and laughed out loud in amazement. They were two of the Elder Abbots, no less. So the invisible Powers That Be really had pulled out all the stops.

"But don't set your hopes too high, Rosalie," the Director had advised her, resting his arm on her shoulder. "You know what people are like. You get a few 3-star reviews in the popular press; maybe an article in a learned journal that hardly anybody reads or can't afford; materialists and hard-boiled scientists dismiss it as woolly-headed romantic idealism; some fundamentalist group starts churning out pamphlets to convince their followers that it's the work of the Dark Lord and his emissaries; and networks full of opinion pieces appear debunking the book, or adamant that their own Cosmic Connections are far more reliable, while other misguided souls set up their own cults based on the work. And it may even be banned in places like Kvinslandia; Erigwid, homeland of the religious zealots of the Hujardi; and the Collectivist Republic of Nur Galan. That's what we're up against."

Rosalie cradled the small, gleaming gold coin in the palm of her left hand. A thoughtful gesture by John, it was a fitting memento of the adventure that she, too, had been engaged in for so many months, and a token of the inestimable importance and wealth contained in the *Treasury.*

"The story will live on in people's hearts, Tenzing," she replied at length, tapping her chest. "I can feel it in my own. And, anyway, regarding what you say: haven't we always been up against it, in one way and to one degree, or another? Though

granted, things have rarely been as dire as they are now."

"I know, I know, Rosalie. I'm just offering a minor corrective, that's all. In my considered opinion, the *Treasury* is a discovery of potentially Earth-shattering proportions, but the jury of public opinion has yet to decide whether it will be a rip-roaring success or a two-week wonder. But then, that's just me."

°Oh ye of little faith.°

Tenzing paused for a moment, as if collecting his thoughts, then abruptly changed tack.

"No, forget I said any of that, Rosalie. Cast it from your mind. You're quite right, and there's probably no better time to publish it."

Again the Director paused.

"And that's the final proof, you say?"

She nodded.

"Then publish it. Publish and be damned, as they used to say."

Those were the magic words that Rosalie had been dying to hear.

So with that, the index finger of her right hand hovering nervously over the keyboard, she hit [Enter] and within hours the first batch of the deluxe hardback edition, with a faithful though translated facsimile of the original front cover and spine, would be rolling off the presses. And shortly after than, Helen and Max would have the book live and available for order, and Professors Coles and Potter would be justifiably jumping up and down in a sudden and emotional release of pent-up nervous energy. No doubt, Harold Grainger would organise a party for them, and Mrs Rowling would bake a special cake to mark the occasion. Congratulations and profound thanks were in order.

After that, all they could do was cross their fingers, hope for the best ... and of course prepare for the worst.

"This is what is known in the trade as a forceful occasion," the Director beamed, leaving her to it.

"Take a break, Rosalie," Tenzing gently advised her as he left her office, half turned toward her, with his hand on the open door. "Once the book is printed, grab a dozen copies – one for each member of the Fellowship, which would include dear old Mr. G, and the rest for the library. Go off to Babs Chu, and put your feet

up for a while. You, too, have certainly earned some well-deserved rest."

~~~O~~~

The End
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The Dissidents: A novel
Third extended edition
By H.M. Forester

Enforcement Officer Kingsley is pretty sure of himself and the Greater Good that the Hive stands for, and he shows no compunction when rooting out the dissidents and having them banged to rights.

But all that changes when he meets Holly Potter, a dissident informant, and he is assigned to work undercover with her, in order to penetrate to the very heart of the dissident movement. What they experience and learn comes at a terrible personal price.

The Dissidents is a dystopian, sci-fi novel of approximately 95,000 words. It is more about people than technology.

In the first two editions, the 46,000 novella stopped abruptly at a cliffhanger at what is now the end of Part 1. It has since been extended.

Sher Point Publications, UK
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